IN ACADEMIA
Charting the paths of Latinx faculty at the University of Washington
Ricardo Gómez
To my daughter, Camila Gómez Wills,  
as she finds her path.

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Preface

This is a collection of stories and conversations with Latinx faculty at the University of Washington, all of whom are being recognized for their accomplishments in 2020 as part of the 4th annual Latinx Faculty Recognition Event organized by the Latino Center for Health. Producing the book in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, we held the interviews online, over Zoom. In a few cases participants responded in writing. The stories are presented alphabetically by last name.

These stories included here represent a variety of disciplines and research areas spanning medicine, biology, economics, anthropology, drama, information, and creative writing, to name a few. Latinx faculty come from a variety of backgrounds and places of origin, and the descriptions of their paths to academia and the University of Washington offer a kaleidoscope of human experiences, ingenuity and resilience. Confronted with obstacles and roadblocks that include poverty, racism, and lack of opportunity, participants describe how family, mentors, an extended support community, and sheer persistence and hard work helped them thrive and succeed in academia.

I asked participants to share their message of inspiration to a hypothetical graduating class of high school students, including many first-generation and Latinx students. Their answers are messages of hope and encouragement, and also include a dose of realism (it will be hard, you will keep on finding racism, you will have to work harder than the rest), and a commitment to help (we need you, we will be there to help you, help will come from unexpected places).

Finally, I like to include visual elements in my research, so I also asked participants to share an image or object that represents them, their trajectory or their work. The stories and images that they shared, some of which we present here, offer a rich tapestry of symbols and expressions of Latinx heritage, pride, accomplishment, and humanity. I hope this collection of stories will be a source of inspiration and encouragement for others in the Latinx community to aim high, to find mentors and support communities, and to reach for the stars.
We edited the interview transcripts for accuracy, brevity, and clarity, to make them easily readable without the strictures of verbatim transcripts. Racing the clock, we kept this work in English only; maybe a future bilingual edition will be possible. This book is made possible by support by UW Latino Center for Health. Many thanks to all participants, and to the research assistants and volunteers who helped put this together at lightning speed: Stephanie Barrios, Erica Chavez, Aida Hidalgo, Andrew McKenna-Foster, Andrea Oliva, Julianne Peeling, Oscar Rosales Castañeda, and Adelina Tomova.

*Ricardo Gómez
May 2020*

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**About the cover design**

The cover was designed inspired by the signs on public buses in Bogotá, Colombia, and many other cities around the world: eclectic and colorful, the bus signs represent the diversity of paths, and the many stops and detours that are experienced by Latinx on their way to academic success.
Introduction

The Latino Center for Health, an interdisciplinary, community-engaged research center, housed administratively in the School of Social Work, organized the first Latinx Faculty Recognition Event in 2017. We recognized nineteen Latinx faculty across the Tacoma, Bothell, and Seattle campuses of the University of Washington for their scholarly contributions and excellence.

The Latinx Faculty Recognition Event celebrates the cutting-edge scholarship and transformational leadership provided by our Latinx faculty. It makes visible in a special way the outstanding achievements, promotion, and contributions of our Latinx faculty. Faculty are recognized for meeting at least one of the following criteria in the academic year: promotion to associate professor or professor, publication of an article in a high-impact journal, publication of a book, securing a major grant, promotion to a significant leadership role in the university or retiring. In bringing together Latinx faculty from across the tri-campuses, it also helps foster stronger ties and community.

The Latinx Faculty Recognition Event continues to grow as an annual event. This year we recognize thirty-two outstanding Latinx faculty. In addition, the Latino Center for Health bestows its inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award on Dr. Gabriel Gallardo. For more than twenty years, he has provided key leadership in the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity and has been a champion in expanding access and promoting success for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students at UW.

The impact and innovation of the Latinx faculty honored each year resounds across the UW community, from classrooms and laboratories, to diverse communities and fields of practice, locally, nationally, and throughout the world. They significantly contribute to the university’s vision of educating a diverse student body, discovering timely solutions to the world’s most complex problems, and enriching the lives of people throughout our community. Importantly, the recognized Latinx faculty members inspire others, including students, and are role models and mentors, particularly to Latinx students and first-generation students,
helping equip the next generation of leaders and scholars. It is important to recognize, honor and celebrate these exceptional faculty members. The Latino Center for Health is happy and proud to organize this uplifting annual event with family members, colleagues, students, university leadership, elected officials, Regents of the University and friends. Also, we are grateful for the staunch support we receive from the Graduate Opportunities and Minority Achievement Program (GO-MAP), the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity, and the Office of Faculty Advancement, who help make this signature event so meaningful and heartfelt.

Gino Aisenberg and Leo Morales
Co-Directors, Latino Center for Health
Respected and revered as a steady beacon of justice and excellence, Dr. Gabriel Gallardo worked at the University of Washington for twenty-seven years. During his lifetime at UW, he provided key leadership in the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity, especially as a staunch advocate for expanding access and promoting success for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students at UW. He was a true Husky, since he also received all his degrees (BA, MA, and PhD) from the UW.

For his generative leadership and indelible impact on students, staff, and faculty alike, the Latino Center for Health honors Dr. Gabe Gallardo with its inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award.

APPRECIATION FROM COLLEAGUES

DR. GINO AISENBERG

Gabe has been providing his leadership through his responsibilities at the OMAD (Office of Minority Affairs & Diversity) for over twenty-five years. I call him “Mr. Husky” because he’s obtained all his degrees from UW. There are two talks that he gave that stick out in my head. One was
at a scholarship event for undergrad scholarships. You got to see the passion in Gabe. His commitment to want to see this next generation have access to higher education. That fire isn’t always seen at meetings that he is a part of, so that was memorable for me. I also saw that same fire when he had applied for the position to be named the director of OMAD, and he was experiencing health challenges then. To see the very deep love and deep care for enhancing access, and advancing the next generation of scholars and leaders was memorable for me because that was his heart. He was disclosing his heart and sharing that heart with us. I really appreciated those two opportunities.

**DR. JUAN GUERRA**

I’ve known Gabe for a long time, and I think one thing that would most likely bring a smile to his face would be our recalling that his wife, Veronica, was a student of mine in the early 1990s. Back then I taught a Chicano Studies course and she was in that class. I remember that I invited the students to my home and she came, and we ended up staying in touch. I think that he would appreciate that we were connected, not just as colleagues, not just as friends, but as students and teachers as well.

One more thing I just remembered: I worked with Gabe a lot through the McNair program that he managed at the UW. I became involved with McNair through him, and he invited me to some of their national conferences. On a couple of occasions, he and I and all the students in the UW McNair program went to Wisconsin for the conference. I got to participate there, and I did that because it was a way to recruit students when I was serving as associate dean and director of GO-MAP. I really enjoyed the opportunity to meet McNair students from all over the country and to talk to them and to encourage them to come to the UW. I also enjoyed sharing in Gabe’s company while we were there as well as here at the UW.

*Tell me something you appreciate about the legacy that Gabe is leaving at the University of Washington.*

Gabriel has done as much as, and in some cases more than, most Latino professionals on campus to advance the effort to educate Latinos and students of color in general. I did not know him when he was a graduate student. I have always known him as somebody who worked at the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity (OMAD). I personally thought he had
what it takes to run OMAD because he had the skill set, he had the ability to engage others and all that. And so, one of my hopes for a long time was that he would be able to move to the next level and continue doing the kind of work he has been doing for so many years here at the UW.

**DR. JOSÉ ANTONIO LUCERO**

About Gabe, one of the things that strike me is the number of undergraduates who have so much affection for him, and that he really has done so much especially for CAMP students. CAMP is the College Assistance of Migrant Programs, which is a federally funded program that has a long and easily beautiful history at the University of Washington, and Gabe has been central to that. Gabe has been the PI for that grant. The way that CAMP community provides a model of providing mutual support for each other has been really remarkable. Gabe was really central to the creation of those types of spaces. For CAMP students, the feeling of having someone that’s at a very high level of administration, that sees them and recognizes them and points them at a future that is bright and promising has been remarkable. I’ve seen it again and again with many students here.

**DR. LEO MORALES**

Gabe is somebody who has been at the university a long time and has touched many lives and I can see it in the students who have spoken to me about him unprompted. They say that they are incredibly grateful for him being there. I’ve always been impressed by the regard that students hold for him and how appreciative they are of his support through their career. He is a legacy.
Thank you, Juan, for being part of this project with the Latinx community. First off, why don’t you tell me a bit about why you are being honored this year?

I am being honored because I am retiring on June 30 after exactly thirty years of service at the University of Washington. I got here in June 1990. That’s the main thing I’m being honored for. But my professional career has spanned forty-seven years, so I’d like to think that what has happened here at the UW is a consequence of what happened before. To make clear what I’ve done over the years, I would like to share some of the things I’ve been involved in as a Latino scholar and educator.

I started my career at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) in 1973 as a lecturer in the teaching of writing. While I was there in the early 1970s, there was a lot of political work going on in the community and on campus. I was fortunate to have been politicized by a group of Puerto Rican independentistas that I met at the time. Over the years, I worked with them and several other activists I met, and together we founded a lot of different Latino organizations. For example, in 1975 we formed El Comité de Educación del Barrio (The Committee for Education of the Barrio) in a Mexican immigrant community near the university. The committee was
formed to help members of the community take control of a new high school that was being built called Benito Juarez High School.

After that, we extended our organizing activities to the UIC campus. In 1978, for example, we founded the Association of Latino Workers, a group comprised mostly of staff and lecturers at UIC. That organization morphed into the Latino Committee on University Affairs (LCUA) in 1982. A few years later, the LCUA established an annual recognition dinner for all UIC Latino students graduating that year, an event that this year is celebrating its thirty-fourth anniversary. It all started because we decided to honor Latino graduating students since nobody else was doing it. I remember that only about thirty-five people attended the first dinner in 1986. The Latino recognition dinner is still going on today, but the event is now held at one of the big convention center hotels in downtown Chicago and more than 500 graduating students, families, and friends attend it every year now.

In 1989, we helped establish the Chancellor’s Committee on the Status of Latinos, which for the first time included tenure-track faculty as well. Then, right before I came to the UW, a group of parents asked me to help them establish an organization called the Association of Latino Parents so that the parents of Latino students at UIC would have a way to engage university administrators. All that, of course, happened before I got to the UW.

A couple of years after I got to the UW, Hilary Stern—a graduate student in my home department (English)—contacted me to ask if I’d be interested in working with her and a group of other activists to establish an organization that would support undocumented Latino workers in Seattle. We spent a couple of years working on that and in 1993, we formed CASA Latina which last year celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. In 2004, another group of individuals and I also founded Campaña Quetzal. The main goal of that organization was to intervene in the public schools of Seattle to support Latino children and their families. Unfortunately, we were only able to sustain Campaña Quetzal for about ten years, but it did a lot of productive work during that time.

I have also been very active on the UW campus. Around 2004, for example, I was appointed one of three co-directors for Teachers for a New Era (TNE). TNE was established through a $5 million grant that the
UW’s College of Education received to completely transform its teacher education program. My job was to represent the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, another colleague represented the College of Education, and a third colleague represented the Seattle Public Schools. After that I served as associate dean and director of the Graduate Opportunities and Minority Achievement Program (GO-MAP) in the Graduate School for five years. And then five years ago, I was appointed chair of the Department of American Ethnic Studies (AES) here at the UW. About the time I became AES chair, Gino Aisenberg, Cynthia Morales, and I worked with colleagues from the UW Latino Center for Health to establish the Latinx Faculty Recognition Event that is honoring me this year as I approach my retirement. I guess I would like to believe that I am being honored for the thirty years I have been here at the UW, as well as for the seventeen years of prior activism that led me here.

*It is a beautiful path that has brought you here. If you look forward to your retirement, which you of course did not anticipate being in the middle of a pandemic, what do you look forward to? And what are a couple of things that you think you will miss upon retirement?*

The one thing I will miss the most is the camaraderie. I have been engaged in addressing Latino issues in particular both here at the UW and at UIC, and that has always been a very highly energizing experience for me. So, yeah, my engagement with others is probably the one thing I will miss the most.

What am I looking forward to? I haven’t figured that out. I’ve been doing this for so long that I have not really thought about what I want to do after I retire. For one thing, I would like to finally take some time for myself and my wife, Diane, so that we can enjoy a slower pace in our lives. I think we have both been very committed to addressing the needs of different groups of students and communities, Latinos and African-Americans, especially, so we will look forward to continuing to do that. Unfortunately, we won’t be able to do that for a couple of years because of the pandemic, but we would like to travel some and enjoy the kinds of things we usually do on weekends, like gardening and taking walks. I would also like to get back to playing the guitar and doing more pleasure reading than I have had time to do in the last many years.

*So, let us look back again on this trajectory. The thirty years that you’ve been*
here at the university and the additional years of the work before, what were things that helped you overcome obstacles that you faced on the way?

I’d say that my family has always offered the most support whenever I’ve had to overcome obstacles. My wife, Diane, and our son, Sean, have played a huge role in my personal and professional lives for more than forty years. They’ve always been there for me, especially while I worked to develop my professional career. As far as my formative years are concerned, there’s no doubt that the biggest influence has always been my mother. She came to the United States from Mexico with my two older sisters a couple of years before I was born. We grew up under very difficult circumstances.

My mother often told me the story of how I was born in a labor camp in south Texas where Mexican families that had come to work in the United States lived in single-room shacks. From there, we moved to the house that I showed you a picture of, and after that, we moved to a housing project where I lived with my family until I moved to Chicago at the age of seventeen. From the beginning, my mother served as the moral center for everything I did. One of my sisters, Bertha, asked me to move to Chicago with her, and that move in particular transformed my life.

The other big influences during my formative years were my teachers in elementary, middle, and high school. Back then—this is in the 1950s and 1960s—I had several teachers who inspired me, who acknowledged that I had something to contribute. Beginning with my first-grade teacher, Ms. Rosales, who taught us English because none of us spoke English, all the way to my junior year when my English teacher publicly praised me by telling my classmates how much she admired my commitment to my education.

Later in college during my senior year, I had a professor, Preston Browning, who asked us to write a final paper on one of the novels we had read in our English class. There were about thirty-two students in the class, but there were no African-Americans or Asian Americans, and I was the only Latino. At the end of the quarter before he passed out our final papers, Professor Browning said, “You all did a great job, but I’d like to read this one paper that I thought was just outstanding.” And so, he read the entire paper out loud and when he was done, he mixed all the papers up and passed them out. I remember the other students in class whispering and
asking each other if it was their paper. Nobody asked me. After class, I went to Professor Browning’s office and thanked him, and he said, “You did a superb job. Your paper was absolutely incredible, so I encourage you to keep writing.” Those are the kinds of individuals that came into my life at critical moments that made me begin to believe that I could do something meaningful in my life.

And then you have turned that around and you have been a source of encouragement and of motivation for others.

Absolutely. For seventeen years I worked as a writing teacher in a minority program similar to the Educational Opportunity Program here at the UW. It was a special program to help students learn how to write academically. The students in our classes were special admit and mainly came from Chicago’s public high schools, which had a reputation as being the worst public high schools in the region. We would get students in our classes who could barely compose a sentence, much less a paragraph or an essay, and our job was to help them develop the skills they needed to succeed in an academic setting. That was fertile territory for me to develop teaching and mentoring skills that would help me support underrepresented students for the rest of my career.

So, let us imagine you were invited to the graduation ceremony of a high school with a lot of Latinos and first-generation graduates. What would you tell them about opportunities going to college and continuing their education? What would be your message to them?

I would begin by telling them my story. I would hope that they would be able to identify with me especially if they were students who are poor or working class and had no plans to go to college because it was never part of my plan either. I would begin by telling them about how I did not speak English until I went to first grade. I would tell them that I faced many of the same challenges they have had to face but that I was able to succeed because I was lucky to come across individuals who were willing and able to support me. I would then encourage them to make use of individuals
in their lives, in their families, their schools, and in other contexts who reach out to them and show interest in their lives and in their futures. I would basically tell them that we all have much to contribute, but that we often can’t do that unless we make use of the support that others provide.

My grandparents and their children at La Villa de Allende, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, around 1924.
That is excellent. Thank you. Now, you sent me some pictures. You spoke of some of them before and you wrote me this:

These are a few pictures related to my formative years. The first is a picture of my grandparents and their children. My mother, who died two years ago at the age of ninety-seven, is the little girl on the right. The picture was taken in La Villa de Allende, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, around 1924.

The second picture is of the house my mother once pointed out to me as one of the places we lived in while I was growing up in south Texas. I was actually born in a one-room shack in a labor camp set up for Mexican immigrants who would get picked up every morning and go work for Anglos in town. From there, we moved to the house in the picture, where we lived for a couple of years before my family moved to Los Vecinos Homes, a housing project where I grew up and lived until I left for Chicago at the age of seventeen.

The third picture is the school picture taken when I was in first grade. I’ve written as part of my scholarship about how I went into first grade not knowing a single word of English. I have two older sisters who were born in Mexico; I was the first born in the US.

The next one is a picture of me with five of my sisters. I have another sister and two brothers who are not in the picture. The final one is a more recent picture of me with my wife, Diane, and son, Sean, at our
fortieth wedding anniversary last summer. Everything I’ve done as an academic, an educator and a scholar has been an attempt to address the challenges that our families faced growing up and the challenges that Latinx and African-American youth in particular continue to deal with in school and beyond.

Would you like to tell me more about one of these pictures?

It would have to be the one of my grandparents and their children. That picture has always been a big part of our lives. Whenever I would go home, my mother would always show me family pictures. One time, many years ago, I took the picture that I shared with you and blew it up and gave copies to everybody in the family. That picture symbolizes the beginning of our family, the roots, the conditions under which my family found a way to move forward. And I remember it most of all because in her later years, before she died at ninety-seven after she developed dementia, my mother would show me that picture.

When I would go visit her, we would be talking and she would always go and grab that picture and say, “Mi’jo, has visto este foto (My son, have you seen this picture)?” I had of course seen it a thousand times, but I would always say, “No, Mami (No, Mommy).” “Mi’jo, sabes quien son estas personas (Do you know who these people are)?” “I would say, “No, Mami, quien son (Who are they)?” “A pues, este es mi Papi, y esta es mi Mami, y esta es mi hermana y este es mi hermano y esta chamaquita, esa soy yo (Well then, this is my daddy, and this my mommy, and this my sister, and this is my brother, and this little girl, that’s me).” And I would say, “Oh, wow, que lindo (how sweet)!”
That picture was one of the things that kept my mother and me and our family connected to each other because we could all look back almost one hundred years and immediately see our roots and, in a sense, also see how far we’d come. There are nine kids in my family. Out of the first six kids, I was the only one who graduated from high school. My siblings dropped out, usually by the ninth grade. And so, when I finally graduated from high school, that was a big accomplishment in my family. My younger three siblings all graduated from high school and went on to college and they all said afterward that I had served as an example for them. All of that is what has influenced me to do what I have been doing for forty-seven years.

APPRECIATION FROM COLLEAGUES

DR. GINO AISENBERG

The origins of the Latinx Recognition event lie with Juan. About five years ago, the ceremony during the “Bridging the Gap” breakfast event was going long, so they were trying to wrap it up. Lauro Flores was one of the last recipients of a particular award. Not that he had a speaking part or anything, but it bothered me. I said, “He’s contributed so much to the life of the university and I don’t even know if his department is here to recognize and support him in this recognition.”

That was on a Saturday, and on Wednesday I had a lunch meeting with Juan. Just to touch base. No agenda. When I got to the lunch I said, “Juan, there was no agenda, but I do have an agenda now,” and I shared about the ceremony experience. Juan shared that in Chicago he was part of helping to initiate recognition of Latino students. That has grown, and now it’s been almost thirty-five years in existence. He was very proud of his role in establishing it, in its growth, and that it had continued to flourish since he’d come to the University of Washington. It was during that conversation that we said, “Well, let’s do something.” I went to the dean of the Graduate School at that time, Dave Eaton. And he said, “You know, this is a great idea but it’s better suited if the Latino Center for Health does it instead of the Graduate School because of optics. If the graduate school is doing this for one population, why not do it for all populations? But
coming from the Center being the Latino Center for Health, it just made
perfect sense.” Then we invited Cynthia Morales, director of GO-MAP, to
help plan. We presented it to the Center, and we did it.

That was the first year we organized it. Ricardo, you were a recipient in
that first year. We didn’t have a list, and to this day, the university has no
list of Latino faculty members that we can access. We have to go through
multiple networks to try to ensure that the word is out so that people are
included if they meet the criteria.

We owe the idea of this recognition to Juan.
It took one conversation with Juan to say, “Yes, let’s do something.” It
just germinated, and we fleshed it out. So, he’s a compadre [godfather]
in the establishment of the recognition event.

DR. RUBÉN CASAS

This story reinforces how Juan has been a good presence for me, and also
how he connects people in ways that are sometimes bewildering in the
moment. It ends up doing something for you that you didn’t even know
that you needed. I had been in Wisconsin for a couple of years, and I was
back in the Northwest visiting my family, and I reached out to Juan just
to catch up. It had been a couple months since I had seen him. I went
up to UW, we took a little walk around campus and we got some coffee.
He had said in the planning emails that he wanted me to meet one of his
graduate students that was really struggling to finish his dissertation. I
was intimidated by this whole prospect, and I was really hoping that the
student would not show up to our meeting because I’m in coursework
as a PhD student. It was year two for me and he wanted me to meet with
this other student who was in the dissertation phase. I’m like, “Oh my
gosh. I’m not going to say no to Juan. I’ll agree to meet, but also I hope
this doesn’t really work out, because what could I possibly say to this
advanced PhD candidate at UW?” We met with the student and he’s like
“I’m having a hard time finishing my dissertation. I don’t understand
all these restrictions.” He was really struggling to find motivation to do
work that he felt didn’t connect to the intellectual being he wanted to be.
I’m going, “I got nothing to offer this guy because I haven’t even started
thinking about a dissertation.” Juan basically put in front of this students
as if saying, here’s another Latino student making it work. What do you
want to tell him, Rubén?
Later, when I had time to reflect, I thought Juan was trying to instill me with the sense of confidence that, perhaps, I had not had. It taught me that Juan already saw me as a colleague. He saw me as someone that he could connect other folks in the discipline with because I had something to offer, even though I wasn’t a professor yet. Maybe he thought “I got to get these two together because they’re probably having similar experiences. Or, they’ve had similar experiences at institutions that maybe are not welcoming to them, or don’t value their work or their ideas in the way that they should be.” For me it was a way to pre-empt those feelings that I inevitably got when I got to the PhD phase. I had to present my prospectus to my advisor three times before she said “All right. I think there’s something there.” Those two other times were kind of disheartening, but I was able to recall that experience with Juan. I thought, “I don’t know, but Juan sees something in me, and he has continued to see something in me. He thinks my ideas are good, so I got to go back. I gotta take that feedback that I got from my advisor, but I have to have confidence in my ideas. They’re good enough that he’s willing to put me in front of another student to tell him about how he should keep going.” It was difficult for me to coalesce an idea that I wanted to do for my dissertation, but I got there. A large part of it was because people like Juan have instilled confidence in me, that there’s a place for me here, and that I shouldn’t give up. You got to keep working. It’s going to be hard, and you’re going to be shot down multiple times, but have confidence in yourself because someone else has confidence in you, too.

*Even though you are still far from retiring, what advice would you give to Juan, a professor who is now retiring?*

Keep prompting us to think about the connections between citizenship and language that a lot of people, for a long time, had been unwilling to think about. This is a concept that has stuck with me even as Juan and I do different work even though we are members of the same field. I think it’s a concept that has allowed me to see myself in the profession. For a long time, my difference influenced my ability to act with confidence, both as a graduate student and later as a faculty member. Certainly, this is not unique to me, but Juan’s consistent and very good reminders via scholarship is one reason our field is being remade through the presence of Latinx scholars. So, to Juan I say, keep showing up with confidence. Just as you did so many years ago to UW, still not a fully minted Ph.D., but still sure in your ability to make an impact and a career. You’ve been a
model for me and, likely, for many. Juan doesn’t wait around to be given permission to do what he does. He just does it and he does it well. I’m certain he will continue to do just that.

**DR. MARIA ELENA GARCÍA**

We got to know Juan when Jason De León was still around. We got here, we all came at the same time, so we were together during 2008, our first year at UW. Jason was very close with Juan and Diane. We were very close with Jason; he was our closest friend, we spent a lot of time with him. So we got to know Juan then, but I really got a better sense of him when Juan became chair of AES. He was in Padelford Hall, the same building that CHID is in, so I would see him every so often while we were in the office. The one thing I love about him is that no matter what is going on, no matter how crazy things are, if I run into him there’s always this warmth. He always has time for you, that’s the thing. No matter what, even if he’s running somewhere, he’ll stop. He stops and he makes sure that he looks at you in the eye, he holds your hand and he says ¿Cómo estás hijita? [How are you], like how are you, what is going on, are you okay. He constantly makes time for you in a context where we’re always moving and having to go somewhere else. He just slows down and he’s always got a smile.

He’s so caring, loving, and for me there had been really hard moments when I was chair and he was just this kind of calming presence. Every time I saw him, even if he was waiting for the elevator, or I’d run into him I knew that no matter if the elevator came he would talk to me until he thought it was okay for me to go. There’s just something about him that is very generous, calming. That’s extremely rare; increasingly so. That, for me, is very special.

**DR. JOSÉ ANTONIO LUCERO**

We had the chance to collaborate with Juan on many things. One of the things was a Sawyer seminar several years ago from the Mellon Foundation. He and I were Co-PIs on the seminar rethinking borders and violence. It was great to work with him, we went through interviews to hire a pre doc and post doc, and being able to benefit from his kindness, intelligence, and being part of constructing something with him was a really special thing. That’s the thing that really kind of makes us feel very
warm about the University of Washington. It’s a place where we found people that can help us make what the university is and what it could be. People like Juan, people like Gabe, people like you. Having that is the reason that we’ve stayed. We’ve had the chance to leave a couple of times and at the end we just feel we are able to do and what we still feel able to do with our colleagues and with our students is magical. That’s something that’s worth holding onto.

**DR. INDIA J. ORNELAS**

From my brief interactions with him what I always remember is just his smile, and how he has such a warm presence. Most of my memories are just being in meetings with him. You know, we all end up being the token Latinos in all those meetings. I remember being in some different diversity meetings with him, and he has such a calm presence and such a sweet spirit and very kind soul. And he brings a lot of humanity to academia.
Tell me, what are you being recognized for this year? In plain language, what is it that you did that won this recognition?

I’m being recognized in this year’s Latinx Faculty Recognition event for my contribution securing grants and funding for the Latino Center for Health in two specific areas. One is the Latino Physician Supply study that is underway. It was a Proviso grant that we secured from the state legislature. I’m co-PI, or co-principal investigator, with Dr. Leo Morales, and that was in the amount of $150,000.

In addition, Leo and I were the principal advocates to secure the renewal of our Proviso budget, which was in the amount of $500,000 for the biennium, or $250,000 per year. But the legislature increased our Proviso funding for the biennium, 2019 to 2021, to $1 million, I think, in recognition of the excellence of the Latino Center for Health and the impact that we’ve been creating.

That is excellent! So, you’re being recognized for getting money for the Center to be able to do more work, and for the great work that it does for the Latinx community. Congratulations! Now if you look back on your life. How did you get to be on the faculty of the University of Washington? What brought you here?

It’s a long story. In terms of being recruited, at the time of my initial
contact with the University of Washington, I was about a year and a half away from graduating from the University of Southern California, and working on my dissertation. I was attending, at the University of Michigan, a week-long summer institute. I believe it was to train on Scott Henggeler’s Multisystemic Therapy. It was a week-long institute, and a representative from the University of Washington in the lunch line said, “You have to meet someone at the University of Washington.” And I’m going, “Huh?” “Yeah, you’re like kindred spirits.” So, she put me in touch with that faculty member. We had a conversation in September, and that led to being invited to come and visit the school, and meet faculty in December. It was just meant to be a casual visit, but it was like an informal job interview because I had a full slate of two days of interviews. But, I was relaxed because I wasn’t on the job market. I was still another year away. Then, other universities heard that I was being interviewed, so they jumped in. At the last minute, USC jumped in. And I’m going, “What the heck is going on? I am still a year away.” Anyway, what attracted me to the University of Washington was both its social justice mission and the faculty.

And my ultimate decision was more a sense of a call. That’s the best way I can describe it, Ricardo. It was a sense of a call. USC at the last minute offered me a position, and I actually accepted the position. But, when I saw the contract was only for a year, I went, “A year?” I felt more like a Latino candidate at USC than I did at University of Washington in terms of being recruited. So, I told the University of Washington: “If you wait a year, I’ll come.” They said, “We’ll wait.” Then, USC said: “Well, if you’re going to go to Washington after a year, we don’t want to invest in you. So, we’ll release you from your contract. I called the University of Washington and the Dean said, “Oh, you can come sooner? That’s great! Come.” But it was a sense of a call. I’ve been stretched because of the experiences here.

Tell me more about the call. What is that feeling of “call”? What was the “calling”?

That there was going to be a space, a place. Not that I had any illusions of being a missionary, but there was a reason why I was being led to the University of Washington. There was a deeper purpose than just a job.
And that’s been borne out in terms of the relationships that have been established across the state with different entities, and now, through the work of the Latino Center for Health. I would never have envisioned engaging in policy efforts through my research. And now, I’m not saying I’m polished in any sense of the imagination, but I’m not intimidated by it. I’m as comfortable as I think I’m going to be in relating to that foreign world of policy before I became part of founding the Center. I think just growing in that ability of impact, and recognizing that because Washington is a smaller state than California, that the relationships and ties are more easily forged. For example, being connected so well with the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic, and with Heritage University. I just have been able to partner with individuals and organizations in ways that I would never have been able to—at least I certainly didn’t envision—at USC, even though that was home.

And if you look back at your trajectory and your years here at the University of Washington, what are things that helped you overcome obstacles when you found them on the way?

I think being connected with some strong faculty that mentored me through the obstacles. But I also think having as a bedrock, the sense of the call. “What am I? What is the purpose for me being here?” I could put up with a lot of the, excuse the language, but the mierda [shit] of the academic life and the inconsistencies that we all experience between vision and practice. I think those would be the two principal factors that allowed me to continue to grow and not lose perspective. And actually, to continue to maintain my sense of voice and purpose.

You mentioned the Yakima Valley. Imagine you were invited to speak to a group of high school graduating seniors from Sunnyside. What would you tell them about going to college or about pursuing higher education?

[Laughs.] I’m laughing because I was invited to be the spring convocation speaker—not the graduation speaker, but the spring convocation speaker—at Heritage University. The convocation recognizes the academic accomplishments of those that have been on the Dean’s List. It’s for the whole university and faculty. Because of the Coronavirus, obviously the event was canceled. But what I reflected on was basically the power of “no.” What I would say to students in Yakima, or students from Kent, or South Park, or Rainier Valley, and other communities, is: We’ve heard
message we’re not good enough. You may have heard school counselors tell you nothing good comes out of Wenatchee, or Yakima, or Granger, or Rainier Valley, or South Park. For me, it was out of South Central Los Angeles. We’ve heard school counselors say, “Don’t think about going to University of Washington or Stanford or UC-Berkeley. Go to the tech school. Go to the community college.” We were familiar with that “no.” And what I would say is flip it. Our excellence is us telling the community and leaders in the world, “I’m not accepting those limits.” I’m saying “No” to those invalidations of who I am, of my abilities, of my capabilities. I’m saying “No” to the powers. Even to our president and other leaders who want to marginalize and oppress immigrant populations, and stigmatize them because of their countries of origin.

That was the gist of what I would communicate. For high school students we know, especially in the Latino community, those that lack documented status, it’s a bigger hurdle to even consider joining the university/college community. The lack of funding resources that will be accessible to them. And, like other first-gen students, not having role models to be able to assist and navigate the myriad paperwork, applications, and whatnot. So, part of the message is to hold on to that passion that’s within you. Also, there are people in the university community that want to support you, want to lift you up, and be lifted up by your questions, aspirations, and passions. That’d be part of what I would want to communicate.

“"There are people in the university community that want to support you, want to lift you up, and be lifted up by your questions, aspirations, and passions."”

Very beautiful. I have one last question. You know, I’m a visual kind of guy. Could you think of an object, a picture, a drawing, a sculpture, something that somehow represents your trajectory as Latino at the University of Washington?

What comes to mind immediately is my mother passed away from breast cancer when I was thirteen years old. The cemetery has always been a source of both solace and a sense of connection for me. At the grave site, there’s this tree on the cusp of the hill that I’ve watched grow over the years. Every time I visit, there’s always a gentle breeze and the tree rustles. Whether that’s divine communication or not, the tree rustles and I think of the image of an arbolito [little tree] that I remember winning at
a raffle when I was maybe six years old. I pitched a dime, and the dime landed in the plate. The prize was a small Christmas tree that I planted in the backyard. I didn’t plant it too well because it ended up growing sideways, but then it went up. But the sense of having roots and being a tree, and watching the trunk grow in strength and density... and then just being robust and being able to offer both shade and a sense of life. I think that, for me, is an image.

I think in my time here at the University of Washington, through mentorship and my own scholarship and having leadership responsibilities in the graduate school, and now in the Latino Center for Health, I’m now one of the ancianos [elders] at the university. I feel that sense of passing on and mentoring faculty, students, and staff. They’re the next generation of leaders. The next generation who will impact our world and society using their gifts—living their gifts. That, for me, is a powerful symbol. I have strong roots. People can lean against me; they can pick my fruit; they can get shade. Teaching, for example, Ricardo: I’ve had to fight with my administrative responsibilities to keep on teaching because I value it. As long as teaching is alive for me, then I want to continue. I continue to experience it being alive. I could teach the same course, but I change the reading substantially each year. It’s not stale for me. It’s not dry for me. So, as long as I feel that, I know I’m on a good path. The tree may look like it’s not growing, but I’m still growing. I’m still growing.

“The cemetery has always been a source of both solace and a sense of connection for me.”
Tell me about the work you are being recognized for this year.

My first book, *Writers in the Secret Garden: Fanfiction, Youth, and New Forms of Mentoring*, co-authored with Katie Davis, came out this year from MIT Press. It’s a detailed exploration of the novel ways young people support and learn from each other through participation in online fanfiction communities. Fanfiction is fiction that features characters from others’ works. Henry Jenkins called *Writers in the Secret Garden* “a significant book that offers a bold new model for how mentorship operates in a networked community.”

How did you end up at UW? What is the path that brought you here?

I had a very nontraditional academic career path. I started out as a software developer in industry, and then took a break to do something completely different: I became an airshow and competition aerobatic pilot, eventually representing the United States as the first Latina pilot on the US Aerobatic Team, competing in the World Aerobatic Championships twice and winning a medal for the US. Flying and the act of risking death in an airplane taught me how to face my fears and overcome my constant worries about “not being good enough.”

Eventually I came to understand that those feelings of not being good enough were coming from forces outside of myself. As my flight instructor had once said when he set up my cockpit to accommodate a five-foot-two pilot, “You might blame yourself, but it’s your environment that’s setting you up for failure.”
And so, I began to take joy in being badass. In 2003 I reapplied and found funding to return to the graduate department where a professor had once told me women didn’t have the intellectual ability for computer science. I finished my doctoral dissertation at UC Berkeley in a year and a half.

I worked at a research lab for five years and then went on the academic job market. I received six offers and picked the University of Washington as the best choice. Today, I’m the first Latina full professor in the College of Engineering at UW.

What helped you overcome some of the obstacles you found on your way to being on the faculty at UW?

My fundamental strength ended up being my parents’ belief in me. Their faith in me gave me the inner strength to fly, to finally return for my PhD, and to find my career path. My parents believed in me when no one else did. My mother loved me and taught me to face fear. My father loved me and told me I was smart. No matter what happened, he never stopped believing I was a genius.

“It only takes one person who believes in you. It only takes one voice to give you strength. I was lucky. I had two.”

It only takes one person who believes in you. It only takes one voice to give you strength. I was lucky. I had two.

Today, as a professor at UW, my driving mission is to be that voice of support for people of color and women in STEM. It only takes one voice.

If you were to speak to a group of first-generation Latinx high school seniors who were unsure about going to college or to UW, what would you tell them?

Go! Education is like money in the bank. Even better, it’s something they can never take away from you. As a Latina in a technical field, I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve been dismissed or passed over until someone hears that I have a degree in math from Caltech or a PhD in computer science from UC Berkeley. I can see the expression on their face change. Education may not matter as much for white men who may be granted respect just because of their appearance, but for us, an advanced degree is a ticket to that kind of automatic respect that we usually never receive, no matter how much we deserve it.
Can you share with me an image (picture, drawing, object) that somehow represents your accomplishments as Latinx at UW?

Well, it’s hard to say how my picture exactly represents my accomplishment as Latinx at UW. Maybe the fact that someone who looks like me is now a full professor in the College of Engineering at UW, the first Latina full professor in its one-hundred-year history?
Thank you for agreeing to be part of this process to collect your story as part of the Latinx Recognition 2020. First off, why don’t you tell me a bit about you and why you’re being recognized. What is it that you have done that calls the attention of the Latinx Recognition Committee?

I think my recognition is two-fold. First, I was recognized because I was instrumental, along with the UWT Office of Advancement, especially Barbara Bartolatz, in getting a grant to fund much-needed lighting equipment for a developing theater program at UW Tacoma. We don’t have a theater major like the Seattle campus does; our program is very small, so this is all part of a greater effort to grow the arts on the UW Tacoma campus. This is only my second year at UW, and before I got here, the Tacoma campus would hire a director to do a play once a year, which was costly. The person they hired was a great director, Marylin Bennett, in our Tacoma theater community. She’s wonderful, but it seemed that the students were aiming to do a little more than a play once a year. So, Michael Kula, a faculty in the writing program, who is now chair of the Culture, Arts and Communication major, pushed to hire somebody full time, and they hired me. In the first year I got here, the program started to grow. In addition to the play that we would produce, we now offered acting and other theater-focused classes. In other words, we were developing a curriculum.

This spring we were slated—and this is why we actually got the grant, because we needed better lighting in the performance space we use at UW Tacoma—to do our very first musical. We sometimes do our shows
at Tacoma Arts Live, whom we have a wonderful longtime partnership with. This year we couldn’t do our production there due to timing so we planned to do the show in our small Communications Studio/Black Box Theater. This presented a challenge and Tacoma Arts Live stepped up and was helping us with sound in the space, but we realized we really needed to update the lighting equipment. You see, we were doing our first musical, so we never had to deal with what that entails in that space, and musicals require more “fancy” lights. This production was a huge accomplishment for UWT, and we were all set to open. We had a beautiful cast, production crew, and both a new lighting board and some new LED lights to boot, but due to COVID-19, we were unable to mount our first musical. However, next year we are scheduled to have two productions, a musical in the fall, perhaps a rescheduling of the spring production, Next to Normal, very tentatively at this point, and a play in the spring.

The important aspect of this is that I was able to broker a wonderful relationship with Tacoma Little Theatre, a theater that’s been in Tacoma for over one hundred years. They agreed to give us another space to produce our work, without a cost to us, which is obviously lovely. It seems like a win-win for both parties for different reasons. They are a wonderful group and a wonderful partnership for us that we were able to secure. I think it’s something that’s going to be really beneficial for us and our students because it gives us another place to showcase their talents and it gives them a different space to learn how to do sound, lights, and have a more hands-on experience. For both of these aspects, I think, is why I was recognized. Truth is, we are so fortunate to have both of these organizations as partners as they both offer something different that benefits our students.

That’s really fantastic, and I’m sorry that the musical won’t happen just yet, but I look forward to the musical and the play next year as things get back into place. Now, tell me a bit more about yourself. How did you end up at UW, and what is some of your path that led you to Tacoma?

That’s a really big question. You can go in so many directions. I am Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan) and Spanish. I was born in Spain, but I grew up in Nicaragua. I was there during the revolution of 1979; I was a small child at the time. After the revolution, in the eighties, I ended up in San Francisco, the Bay Area, via Miami, because all Nicaragüenses (Nicaraguans)
stop by Miami at some point into the US. I was raised in California after moving there at age thirteen, I spent a good part of my childhood there. I traveled quite a bit and I was even a flight attendant for a while, but I always came back to the Bay Area and still to this day consider it home.

When I finished grad school in Detroit, I was really willing to do just about anything to get back to California because I missed it so much. That year there were two jobs that were available in California that I qualified for, and I got one of them, it was in Bakersfield, California. If you’re not familiar with Bakersfield, it’s in the Central Valley and it is probably the most polar opposite from San Francisco that you can get. I figured I would go to Bakersfield and spend a few years there and then see where the journey took me. But then, I was there for over ten years; I don’t know how that happened. I ended up having two of my children there and a lot of life happened while I was there. I sort of woke up one morning and realized that I had been there longer than I thought I would be.

While I was there, I divorced and remarried. The wonderful human I married was a woman, and in Central Valley, Bakersfield, California, well, let’s just say it’s not the best place to do that. While our core group of friends and the university was safe and welcoming, the rest of the city was something different. We couldn’t go places without getting stares and some of the parents of our kids’ friends wouldn’t want to let their kids have playdates with our kids because they had two moms and it just started to feel like that area was not a place we wanted to be anymore. So, when I started applying for jobs, I only applied to places that we wanted to live, and this was a place we wanted to live, in terms of quality of living and a very open environment.

I mean, my kids even still go to a Catholic school and nobody bats an eye that there’s two moms, and that’s what we were looking for, a very progressive area. So, Tacoma did not disappoint at all, and that’s really what brought us here, trying to find a place that was open and progressive. Those are all the personal reasons anyway. The other side of that was

“\textit{It’s not always easy, and that sometimes you will feel alone. And in fact, sometimes you will be alone. There may be no one who looks like you who is in your field, there may be limited resources for whatever reasons, but I would say to not give up.”}
what the job offered. This was a chance to build something new. Every other program I have been involved with in higher ed has already had a developed curriculum and a long history. UW Tacoma was a chance to make history and build something new. And although this is sometimes very isolating and scary, it is also so exciting.

Our gain to have somebody like you join our faculty, so that’s great. Now the path for Latinos and Latinas is not always nice and paved. What helped you and your path when you overcame obstacles? What were some of the things that helped you move forward and get to where you’re at now?

Honestly, community … and finding it, it wasn’t always easy to find. My undergrad started at San Jose State, which actually does have a lot of Latinos, well sort of. But when I first got there, I remember I was living in the dorms and I looked around and I cried. I cried a lot those first couple of weeks because I looked around and I didn’t really see anybody that looked like me and I felt incredibly isolated. I wanted to quit. I’m like, “Why am I here?” I was an hour away from San Francisco, so I could easily go home, and I wanted to go home all the time.

And then, this young woman who was in one of my other classes said, “Hey, I am going to this meeting—it’s an informative meeting for a Latina sorority.” And I was like, “What the heck is that?” I had heard of Greek organizations, but I didn’t know what a Latina sorority was, but I agreed to go. I went with her and I met this incredible group of women who were really there to encourage one another and hold each other accountable with our academics and of course partied a little bit too. But it was just a wonderful group, and a lot of these women are still my friends. Even more than that, they are my sisters. They were and are my family. Lambda Sigma Gamma (LSG) became the community I needed.

I think I realized, even when I went into my master’s program and my doctoral program that I often felt isolated. I was often the only Latina in a department, and I realized I had to find community somewhere, and it wasn’t always in my department. Sometimes they have to be outside of it, but I think that for me what got me through, was just finding that sense of community or creating it.

And what would you say to a graduating class of high school students in the Central Valley if you were a graduation speaker? What would be your message?
to a group of Latinos consisting of many first-time high school graduates?
I think the first thing is to be honest and to say that it’s not always easy, and that sometimes you will feel alone. And in fact, sometimes you will be alone. There may be no one who looks like you who is in your field, there may be limited resources for whatever reasons, but I would say to not give up. I would say that it really does get better when you make it over that really, really steep hill. I would really encourage young students to find that sense of community as well, because I think that’s really what made a difference for me.

And *familia* (family) doesn’t always look like what we think it will. I mean we are often raised to think of family as just your blood—the people that you’re related to, but family can be the family that you make and the family that you create, and I think that sometimes those are the ones that get you through. So, I think being open to a new type of family is good advice.

*That’s really good. Now, I like to visualize things. Is there a picture, drawing, object, something that you could describe to me that represents your path as a Latina that has been a faculty for thirteen years and is now at the University of Washington?*

“So you ever seen that, just like a dark stage and there’s just a stage light that gets brought forth and left on? It’s supposed to keep the ghost away, but this light also means that we’ll be back.”
Do you know when you’re in a theater and there’s a light that gets left on when everybody leaves, and everything is turned off? Have you ever seen that, just like a dark stage and there’s just a stage light that gets brought forth and left on? It’s supposed to keep the ghost away, but this light also means that we’ll be back. And I feel like that’s very representative of me and my artistic journey in so many different ways.

Because I’m a Latinx queer artist scholar, and I wear many hats. I sometimes direct, sometimes I write, sometimes I’m doing research, and other times I am creating. I feel like for me, not just at UW Tacoma, but in my entire career, it’s always been this light that has been a beacon that brings me back to the stage. It always makes me come back to the theater, even when I take a little hiatus. I wrote a book a few years ago and that whole time, I was going to Nicaragua and I was doing research, and I didn’t have time to direct. But at some point, I always come back because it calls to me.
Tell me a bit about why you’re being recognized this year as part of the Latinx Recognition at UW. What is your work? What warrants your recognition this year?

I’m faculty in the Department of Health Services in the School of Public Health, and my work centers in community-based interventions to promote health among Latino communities in the United States. This year, I had the opportunity to publish a couple of papers that have to do with some of the research I do. My research, my teaching, and my practice center around community-based interventions to promote health among Latinos, particularly access to healthy food and physical activity, and I take both a community-based participatory approach and an implementation science approach. So, really, it’s taking the best evidence and trying to think about how to disseminate that in the communities where Latinos live; that could be urban areas or rural areas.

Some of the work that I published, last year or this year, centered around certain implementation science methods. Particularly, I’m proud of this work because the two papers are collaborations with colleagues across the country. I have a series of collaborations with faculty and scholars from different universities across the United States, and we develop these ideas and move them forward together, so I am really proud of doing that. The other paper that got published is work that I’ve been doing since graduate school with my mentors. It’s around access to healthy foods in
tiendas and Latino stores. It is work that I did during my dissertation, and I continued working with my mentor. Moving that work forward has been part of the focus of my career. So, we’ve been publishing a lot of this work for several years, and now one of the papers that I am being recognized for is one of those. I’m very excited and very proud of that work.

The last thing that is also being included is that I’m a co-principal investigator for one of the Population Health Initiatives that happened sometime in January or February. I added this to the list because I’m also very excited and very proud of that work. It’s a community-engaged project, it’s centered in Seattle. I’m working in my own neighborhood and community now, and it’s really looking at how we can advocate for more fair and just opportunities for being physically active and for mobility in the city. I’m very excited to see how that works. It’s going to take shape and I’ll be doing it this year, but that’s also something that is getting recognized. That is excellent. So there are two papers, one of which stems from the work that you did way back since you were a doctoral student and you’ve continued to do. And not just that, but a new grant with funding for more future work on community health. Fantastic. Congratulations.

Thank you.

How does a Latina like you end up at the UW? What is the path that brings you here?

That’s a great question. I mean, it’s a question that I can answer in so many different ways. I should bring up that I still feel like recent faculty, like a new hire at the University. I started at UW in January 2019, so this is about my sixteenth month in this job, and it’s my dream job. I think it is. I’m very happy to be at UW and very happy to live on the West Coast, in Seattle particularly. It’s a great city.

So, how did I end up here? My husband said we are academic migrants. I am an immigrant who originally landed in San Diego, California, because that’s where I had family when I immigrated to the United States. I lived there for a long time, and that’s where I went to school. I trained at San Diego State University, that’s where I have my mentors. But after I graduated it was time to leave. It’s like, you gotta go somewhere else, you can’t stay here. My first academic job out of grad school was in North
Carolina. I’ve been going around the country, finding opportunities, and getting ready for this job for a while. After I left the West Coast and went to North Carolina, that was a big eye-opener for me in terms of how different California, and living as an immigrant in California, is compared to living in other places.

I lived there for two years as a postdoc, at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. That’s where I trained in community-based participatory research and I gained my reputation and my expertise, really engaging actively and truly with communities to decide interventions about health promotion. Then, my first job as a faculty was actually at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City, in the Midwest. So, again, it was a great opportunity because it was a great first job to have as faculty in the Department of Public Health, in the School of Public Health, and in the Department of Community Health. And it really was an opportunity for me to figure out how to be an independent researcher and really establish a research program in an area where there was a growing community, a Latino community, but very little research and partners to work with. It was a challenge, and I learned a lot from it.

After a while, I realized that this is great, but we wanted to be back on the West Coast. And this opportunity came and, you know, you grow up knowing that the University of Washington has a great reputation and a great School of Public Health. One of the things that was attractive was not only going back to the West Coast, but having the opportunity to work with great colleagues that I already knew and respected. And to me, this University and living back on the West Coast in Washington sort of brings together many other things that I have been doing in my career so far, in terms of leveraging my expertise and my experience working in rural communities with growing Latino populations, but also having the opportunity through this environment, to take my career to the next level. It was really an opportunity to think about how I can play in the major leagues, if you would, for research. It’s been both personally and professionally what brought us here, but I think it’s been a great opportunity, so I’m pretty happy.

That’s good. Now, if you look back on that meandering from California, to the East Coast, back to the West Coast, and all this personal and academic progression and growth, there are certainly many obstacles and roadblocks on the way. What helped you overcome obstacles? What are things that you
reach out for, or that you draw from when you face obstacles to overcome them? What helps you along the way?

I think about that too. I think there are two major things that I draw strength from personally and professionally in terms of these obstacles.

I think professionally, I’ve been very fortunate to be trained and mentored among an incredibly group of Latino professors in California, San Diego. It sort of feels like I have very deep roots. In terms of why I did this, why I took on doing a PhD and being a Latina researcher on Public Health and Latino issues, I think that comes from that sort of honest and joyful, but also very rigorous, training that I got. I had really great role models that I still consider part of my family in a way, and I always go back to them. So I have kept my strong ties to that community that has helped me throughout the evolution of my career. When I had to make decisions about where to go for a job, or what kind of grants to write, or maybe I was facing some challenges with faculty or decisions that I needed to make, I was drawn back to that group of people, that network that I had, and they helped me to make those decisions. And I trusted that they were looking out for my best interests, and they haven’t disappointed me. I feel very fortunate because I have that. That has been important, keeping those relationships.

Also, grounded on the power and responsibility that I have been given in terms of this opportunity, I came to the United States thinking I was going to go through a master’s level program, and then maybe go back to my country. So, I ended up in a research lab with a bunch of powerful and kind Latino role models. And they said, “You’re good at research, you should keep going,” and that was the motivation. Then, it was realizing that so few of us have these opportunities, in terms of being Latinos and being in these role model positions, or even always being the only Latino faculty in many institutions. It’s tough to do it, but I also draw strength from that because it’s such a privilege and a social responsibility. I think that’s sort of how I think about it, in many cases, really trying to
understand and become more aware of the dynamics of the institution and how to manage that. That’s a complicated answer, but I think that’s where I’m coming from.

That’s a really good answer. If you look back to when you were starting, or if you think of young kids who are finishing high school now and being curious about higher education, about going to college, what would you tell them? What would you tell a graduating class of high school students now? What would be your advice, your motivation?

What I will try to convey to them is that education is an investment, and when you get it, nobody is going to take it from you. It’s a very powerful experience, even though it feels very painful and very costly sometimes. Your education, nobody can take it from you and it really will allow you to do whatever you want with it. Part of it is just the process of going through your education, and going through that process and learning about yourself, but also what it will afford you afterward. That’s what I think about, and then maybe I can talk about some of my own experience. I still have my accent. I think I’m very Latina, non-white person looking, and have been in very difficult circumstances. For example, living in North Carolina and realizing that, oh dear, there are no brown people like me everywhere, like in California. I was able to cope and manage and sort of negotiate my spaces, not only professionally, but personally, because of certain things that I had; because of who I was and the degrees that I carry, and the opportunities and the access to spaces that I have; because of what my education afforded me to do. And I don’t think that I would have had that confidence if I didn’t have my education, or being in that position. So, I always try to tell students that you gain a lot of leverage with your education and the process that you go through. I do encourage thinking of it like it’s something nobody can take from you, and then you use it however you want to.

Now one of the things I do in my own research is I use images and symbols and objects. Can you think of an object or an image that represents you or your work? It can be an imaginary picture, too. What do you think?

I think one thing that I’m proud of is that I’m already trying to build some relationships with community leaders, and this group of them is Latinas who are powerful in many ways in the community. We are having these dinners together to talk about this project. That is very engaging. I want
them to know me and to trust me, so we do it through food. Actually, our last event was going to be a happy hour instead of dinner, and we had to cancel it because of COVID. If that is an image, I think that that is something that I want to cultivate: it’s those good strong relationships and ties with the community to help me inform and use the resources and the leverage that I may have through the University to do good work in the community. I think food is really important and I do research about food. This is a bunch of us together, talking and chatting, and it’s me learning from them mostly, so that’s an image, that’s the way I want to do my work.

*When my wife gets together with her group of women, she calls them the super women meetings.*

To me, something that is beautiful about this particular group, and in general for Latinos in the state, is the diversity of experiences and even countries of origin. But here, this group that I’m referring to, they’re women from Central America, the Caribbean, South America, and also Mexicanas. It feels good because there are many different accents and everybody thinks about foods in a different way, but we all love it, and all those things together feel really great.

*I’ve started to introduce questions about food when I’m trying to find out about people and identity, and the bits on food are usually the most interesting because people speak most passionately about food, the food that drives them, what it represents, and what it reminds them of. Now, that group of your super women, you have been meeting for some time and then your last meeting had to be canceled on account of COVID, right?*

Yes, yes.

*Any chance somebody took a picture of one of the gatherings before?*

I don’t think we did because it’s actually a project supported by the Latino Center for Health. So, we never did so. We should have.

*Are you holding something remotely? Are you having a happy hour by Zoom?*

That’s what I’m thinking. At first, I was thinking it was right in the middle of the very tense crisis, so I’ll just let it be because they also run community-based organizations. I knew they were deep into responding and
being out there, and I know that that’s what they needed to do. And so, it’s like, just let me get out of the way because they don’t need to be dealing with me right now. But now that things are a little bit better, I’ve been actually thinking about this. Maybe we should try to get together and do something virtually, or just for me to send them an email and touch base with them somehow. It still is a growing relationship, so I’m very cognizant of how I need to figure out how to keep it going. What speaks loudly to me is that these happy hours are going to be hosted in one of the women’s houses. To me, that is pretty symbolic because I’m willing to open my house. I’m the newest person in the group. They’ve all known each other for years, so it’s kind of fun to be the newcomer and try to understand the relationships. I found it really encouraging, to say the least. I know that we’ll eventually get back to that because I think everybody looks forward to it.
Tell me a bit more about why you’re being recognized this year, in everyday language so that everybody can understand. What is it that you did that warrants this recognition?

I published some work this year that I think, for me, represents what I’ve always wanted to do with my scholarship. To have it be connected to the communities that I am part of or have been part of. Also, for it to offer more than just a critique, but also a way of doing something differently than, perhaps, you would do before. So, very specifically, I published two articles. Both of them relate to a growing interest of mine, which is how neoliberalism is impacting public space.

My training has instilled in me the idea that public space is essential to well-functioning, ethical, good, inclusive communities and public life. I’ve become interested in how public space functions when you insert the influence of the idea that everything needs to be productive; everything needs to be consumed; we all need to be buying or selling; everything belongs to someone, or some entity. It can’t just be a public good for the public benefit. I’ve really wanted to understand how that impacts physical spaces themselves. For example parks, sidewalks, plazas. And, by extension, how it affects how people relate or don’t relate to each other in those spaces. Interestingly, one public space that I wasn’t thinking about is public university campuses. It was sort of a blind spot for me that neoliberalism is really impacting universities across the US and across the world. Even a university like ours, we have this language about who we are and what we do in terms of making citizens, making critical thinkers out of people, and making productive people out of our students. I sort of fell into this conversation because, at the time, I was at Fresno State and
when I was there, we were having big conversations about this space on campus called the “Free Speech Zone.”

*A designated space for that?*

Yes. It’s a designated space for free speech. Which, I always found curious because I’m like, “Well, this is a public university. Presumably, you have free speech everywhere on campus.” So, I started looking into it, specifically around one controversy that had to do with free speech around pro-life/pro-choice conversations. I learned that the university benefits or profits in some way, both symbolically and monetarily, from designating a space a free speech zone. It gives you the impression that this is the right place, the protected place, in which to have controversial dialogue. This has slowly turned into a subset of this larger work that I’m doing. Then, I went down to Reno this past summer to work with a team of other folks to study what the campus development at the University of Nevada, Reno, would mean for various vulnerable communities, both inside and outside of the university. I was able to publish something out of that, as well. And I say it’s a subset because I’m still thinking largely about parks, plazas, sidewalks, but university campuses have really become a focal point of this research, even though I didn’t initially think about them when I started thinking about public space.

*That is super interesting. So, tell me, how did you end up being Latino faculty at the UW?*

When I was at Fresno State, I was doing work related to undocumented youth and undocumented students. Fresno is in Central California, and it’s the fifth largest city in California. It is historically an agricultural city, so it’s surrounded by farmland. A comparable city in Washington would be Yakima, except that Fresno is bigger. But its population demographics, policies, politics, and economies are very, very similar. When I was at Fresno, which is a Hispanic-serving and Asian-and-Pacific-Islander-serving institution, I realized that the city itself is also a minority majority city. And that a lot of the Latinos there had been there for generations. I mean, my own parents pick fruit in the Fresno Valley, although I’m from Southern California. In fact, there are old Latino families in the Fresno area. However, the city has no representation in its leadership or its policymakers that would consider themselves Latinos. There are some, but it’s very small. In fact, much of the power—economic, political,
etc.—in Fresno is still sort of monopolized by a white minority. A white minority that traces its wealth back to ownership of the land that Latinos have worked for a long time.

So, I started getting involved in conversations that were more public facing, that had to do with how cities are organized, how people have access to deliberation in cities. How that results in a place that is visibly Latino, but is not controlled by or run for or organized for Latinos. That just became a question for me. I started talking to elected officials. I started walking streets and taking note of: Why does this neighborhood have sidewalks? Why doesn’t it have a sidewalk? I typically get around by bus. Why does this part of the city have bus service, or regular bus service? How long do people have to wait at a bus stop? What happens if you miss it? Who is taking the buses? I just started taking a more active role in trying to understand how cities are organized.

Also, I started putting that together with my own training as a rhetorician. Which, for me, means that I study how people influence each other through language. So, I put my training together with what I was observing. Being trained as a rhetorician, I mostly deal with text. I like the simplicity and the possibility of finding something that’s been written or produced, and studying it, and analyzing it. Because I wanted to understand more about how Fresno got to be the way it was, I started getting involved in what is a growing area within my discipline, public rhetoric and public writing. Understanding how people do this type of work, but for a public audience with more community-engaged work. Well, then this position came open. They were looking for someone to help develop a track within the writing studies major around public writing and public rhetoric. UW Tacoma is a community-engaged campus, so it was kind of an ad written for me because my work had taken a turn towards doing rhetoric out in the world and working with communities and helping students become effective communicators in their communities. And that’s how I got to where I am now.

That’s a really beautiful story. Now, along that trajectory there were roadblocks and obstacles. What helped you get over the roadblocks in your path to where you’re at now?

There are two answers to this. The first is I’ve been lucky enough to have had really good mentors, in a professional sense, along the way. Just this
week, I was chatting with a professor of mine at Oregon State, who got me started on this path towards being a professor. She was one of my professors and committee members when I was working on my Master of Fine Arts. She was not even in my discipline, but she took me aside after I graduated and took me out to lunch. She wanted to know, “What are you going to do now?” My answer was, “I am going to write the next great novel.” She’s like, “That’s awesome. I fully support that. But in the meantime, have you thought about teaching writing? Because you’re really good at it. You have really great original ideas and you also represent a different person in the discipline. You are Latino. You have something to contribute beyond your knowledge and your expertise. You should think about this and think about it really hard and know that I will support you.” So, two years later I was successful. I got into a number of PhD programs and I went on to do my PhD. One of the programs I got into was University Washington’s, but I didn’t go to UW for my PhD. I went to the other UW—University of Wisconsin. But when I was considering University of Washington, I met Juan Guerra. And I told him, “I’m not going to come here, Juan. I’m going to Wisconsin, but your insight has been very valuable to me.” He said, “Well, let’s keep chatting. I want to keep tabs on you as you go through your program and beyond.” And you know what? I’m still talking to Juan Guerra. I just emailed with him last week about a student of mine from Fresno that is coming up to do the PhD program at Washington.

“I’m just pointing out that I’ve been lucky to find really good advisors, mentors, and friends in the profession and outside of it. Juan had no reason to stay connected. He could’ve said, “We didn’t get him. That’s cool. We might cross paths at a conference down the line or something,” but no. Juan would meet up with me at conferences and take me out to lunch, ask me how things were going, and I could ask questions of him. My road is paved with generous people that have sought to make room for me in their worlds and have directly invited me to be part of their worlds. Not just suggested it. Not just hinted that it would be a good idea but said, “You would be a really good contribution to the profession. You would be a really good professor.”
The second aspect of my answer is my family. As a Latino, I’ve leaned heavily on my family, even though my family probably still doesn’t have a very good idea of what my professional life entails. But they’ve always been very supportive. I told you that my parents picked fruit in the Central Valley when they first immigrated to the US from Mexico. I remember getting my job at Fresno, and my mom saying, “Oh, I was there in the seventies. I used to pick grapes.” And I was going there as a professor. I had a lot of support from my family, even though I don’t think they always knew what I was doing or why I was doing it. When I would fly back from Oregon, which is where my family is now, I would have a valija [suitcase] full of food that my mom had cooked and frozen for me, so that I could take it back to Wisconsin and be able to eat the food that I know from home. It’s a different time zone, but my mom was sending me home with luggage full food that would sustain me for six months. So that I could have enchiladas, chile rellenos or chorizo that she made for me.

Why I’m crediting my family is because I learned discernment through them. To know when there’s an opportunity or when there’s a pitfall. Sometimes they both come to you, looking like the same thing, and to know when I should say, “Yeah, I’m going to allow myself to participate in this committee or in this project or in that opportunity.” Or, to say, “I don’t think that’s the best use of my time right now. I see a potential conflict there that won’t serve me down the line.” I credit my family for giving me the insight to be able to discern things like that. Professionally, as a faculty member at UW, I use that every day—discernment.

That’s really cool. So, let me take you back to Fresno, metaphorically. If they invited you to speak at a high school graduation, what would you say to a group of high school graduates, many of whom might be first-generation or Latinos? What would you tell them about aspirations of going to college or to a school like UW?

I would tell them that if they want to go to the University of Washington or just go to college or even have some curiosity about it, to go for it. When I was finishing community college and thinking about going on or not my mom said, “What else are you going to do in those two years? Those two years are going to go by anyway.” If you have the curiosity about what happens if you get a bachelor’s degree, then just go get it. Get the degree and see what’s possible. You should give it a go. If you have
the means, the capacity, the support, and even if you don’t, it’s probably still worth giving it a go.

However, the other really important thing I’ve told students that I’ve worked with who have gone on to do a master’s or a PhD is it’s going to be hard for a variety of reasons. Some of it is because doing intellectual work is really hard. Some of it is because the rhythms of being someone that does intellectual work are ill defined. You have to be the type of person that sets your own pace, gets up in the morning, and puts themselves in a chair to start writing, or researching, or teaching. It’s also going to be hard because most universities, including ones that are recognized as being Hispanic-serving or historically black colleges, are still spaces that are organized around the experiences that are not you. It means that you can expect some friction and some difficulty.

It also means that you will have to work to find your people. We are here. Some of us are already here and are working to make this type of place function differently than it did in the forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties. It’s still not perfect. Even now that I’m a professor at UW, I still find challenges. The only way I know how to explain them is no one thought that a person like me would be in this room on this day. And so that means that I need to be able to email, call, or text someone to ask, “What should I do? Have you ever encountered this situation?” If you get there, start finding your people. And it’s not always going to be easy to find them because it’s not like they’re walking around with a sign that says, “Hey, I’m here to support you.” But we are around. Sometimes it’s going to be a staff member. Sometimes it’s going to be a professor in a major that you’re not even in. Sometimes it’s going to be another student. Sometimes it’s the person that cleans the room you had a class in, but you stayed in to study afterwards. They can offer insight and guidance when you don’t know whom to ask. Schools are trying and things are changing, but it’s still going to be difficult. If you’re going to UW, you can always reach out and I’ll always be up for chatting or helping you.

Good, thank you for this. Can you think of an image, a picture, a drawing, a sculpture that somehow represents your trajectory of being a Latino at the UW?

This is an image of me, along with one of my one of my favorite collaborators, Anaid Yerena. She’s in the School of Urban studies, and I’m in
the School of Interdisciplinary Studies. There’s a screen because we just finished giving a presentation in Denver on community-engaged scholarship. On one side of the screen was Mark Pagano, the chancellor at UW-Tacoma, then me. The screen says, “Charting Our Course,” and it’s got a picture of UW-Tacoma. We had just presented our progress and our plans towards making UW-T a stronger anchor in the community. Both in terms of how we’re building physically, but also building infrastructure that supports community-engaged teaching, learning, and scholarship. On the other side of the screen is Anaid Yerena and Ali Modarres. Ali is my confidant, my mentor, my guide at UW-T. He’s now the Dean of the School of Urban Studies, but from the first week that I was a faculty member at UW-T, he sought me out.

For me, that picture represents what I’m doing at UW and how I see myself growing in the UW, by collaborating. Also doing research and teaching on how cities, universities, and communities work together. It’s also about charting a course that I or the university don’t quite know yet, but we’re very excited to be headed together on that path.
Thank you, Sarah. It’s great to have you here as part of these conversations with Latinx faculty at the UW.

Thank you for having me.

Why don’t you start by telling us a bit about what you’re being recognized for. What is your work, and what makes you a Latinx honoree this year?

Well, I am both a scholar and creative writer. I’ve had some publications specifically having to do with food and its connection to culture. Though the primary work being recognized is a larger project here in Tacoma that I’ve been very lucky to be working on. It is called the ALAS Storytelling Project (Adolescent Latinas Advancing Salud Mental), a youth-focused community-based research project designed to promote mental health and foster support among Latina adolescent girls through the act of storytelling. As a creative writer, poet, and creative nonfiction writer, my contributions to this are largely around creating storytelling curriculum and working directly with the girls to teach and model the empowering nature of storytelling and how significant it is to build community and self-confidence. That is certainly something that I didn’t have when I was that age, even though I was in California. I had representation in the city, but I wasn’t seeing reflections of my life in books or stories provided institutionally. I wasn’t given that kind of material in school and I wasn’t being encouraged to have conversations about things like class and gender, and certainly not about the differences that intersectionality makes, particularly depending on the kind of household that you’re coming from. That is largely what I and the amazing Latina faculty I am working with are trying to bring to these local, young Latinas. So, I assume that’s the main
reason you all very generously want to chat with me.

You say “assume” because you don’t know exactly what the recognition is for?

Yeah, kind of, [laughs] to be perfectly honest.

I’ve been finding that with others as well. Others have also said, “Oh, I don’t know.” But, well, what is your best guess? What is it that you’re proud of that might be what would lead to this? That’s an interesting feature of this project. You’re working with storytelling with Latina adolescents, and here you are telling me your story for another collection of stories about storytellers. We all do storytelling.

There are a lot of meta layers going on right now.

So, tell me about your story. How does one Latina woman like you end up in the faculty at the University of Washington.

You know, I sometimes ask myself that question. I’m from Fresno, California. My dad is Mexican, my mom is white, and I grew up living my life in both cultural worlds. Each side of my family was relatively traditional, so I learned code switching at a very young age, both at the level of language and the level of a kind of cultural appropriateness. This has been a significant part of my identity and I have used scholarship as a way to try to understand where I fit with this mestizaje. Gloria Anzaldúa’s book Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza and really, also her last book, which was published posthumously, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality, have been integral to my journey as a writer. I always liked creative writing. I did well in school, but there was not really support for that. I mean, there was definitely support for wanting me to do well in school, but it always felt more like a means to financial security: get good grades, get a good job. And particularly, coming from a working-class background, I didn’t know anyone who was a writer or in higher education. Most of my family have not gone to college. So, getting to this place, has been interesting. I’ve worked a lot of jobs. I started working young, around thirteen, and sort of never stopped. It was not until a few years into my time at Cal State Fresno when I was encouraged by one of my professors that I even seriously considered writing. I specifically liked writing poetry, but in my mind, it was in the category of wanting to be a musician—not something that
could be seriously considered. The subject of “English” as a major has always had that rhetoric of “What can you do with that?” surrounding it. So, you know, I was thinking about the possibility of social work and was a psychology major. However, after that professor encouraged me, I ended up getting the opportunity to work on a Chicanx literary magazine called *Cockroaches, Flies, and Poets*, which was a wonderful experience.

*Intriguing title.*

Yeah, it’s a good title, and the journal is still active. Overall, it’s been a bit of a winding road. After college, I ended up working in a drug and alcohol recovery home as an administrative assistant for almost two years. But after graduating with his MA, my partner wanted to keep going in school, and I thought, “You know, I really miss writing,” and I really missed having a community to talk about writing. So, we ended up going back to school together. First, we ended up in Indiana, then I ended up at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln specifically to work in their ethnic studies program alongside creative writing. In retrospect, it seems like a weird journey to leave one of the most diverse places in the US, that was my home, for me to have space for perspective. I guess I had to see how race, ethnicity, and gender was being codified across the country. California, and I say this as a Californian deep in my soul, doesn’t necessarily consider or reflect the cultural negotiations of other states; it’s just too big.

Getting to teach ethnic studies, getting to teach storytelling focused on inviting people to understand their intersectionality, and getting the opportunity to focus on the fact that there’s not one way to experience Latinidad, not one way to experience ancestral, familial history has been essential to this larger journey. And in part, I am here at UWT because I was invested in moving back to the West Coast. I had been teaching at Marshall University in West Virginia, which was a wonderful experience, but also isolating. I didn’t have a cultural community, and I deeply missed that. I also wanted to be closer to family. So, when this job popped up, it

“Representation is important, but not just professor representation; students in historically marginalized demographics need to be visible. Now is the time to try new things and bring your unique perspective because if you don’t, someone else is going to miss out.”
not only fulfilled those desires, but was also interdisciplinary in focus, which is most in-line with my grad school study and what I’ve always wanted to work in. Getting to teach in the new Latino Studies minor here, as well as creative writing, is really a dream.

That’s fantastic. In that long and winding road you described, you mentioned a path like many of us. We’ve had winding roads that brought us here. There’s all sorts of obstacles and roadblocks, but rather than talking right now about those roadblocks or obstacles, I’d like to ask you what kind of things do you do to help you overcome roadblocks and obstacles when they show up. What is it that you do, where you draw force and strength from, and what helps you?

I think one of the things that helps me is meditating on ancestral connection. I mean that both spiritually and literally. I think about hard work my family endured for me to have the privilege of getting to pursue something like academics. I think of my ancestors and their struggles and the strength required to make it through. I believe we inherit that strength, that it is in our cultural DNA. So, I come back to the stories of my family, as well as thinking about literary ancestry. I frequently go back to the texts and art that I found most formative. Sandra Cisneros talks about going to the Iowa Writers Workshop and what a difficult experience it was, but that in part, she persisted to create writing that represented her experience. I want to write about my communities. I want to follow the advice in one of Toni Morrison’s most famous quotes that says, “If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.” I take that to heart. If you don’t see yourself, your gente [people], then write them. That idea bolsters me.

This is maybe tangential but graduating with my PhD was one of the most emotional, exciting days of my life. Like you said, we have a lot of obstacles, but there I was, first person in my family to earn a PhD—so I got a tattoo to commemorate that. It’s a turtle that has a book on its back and around the turtle is a quote from Borderlands that says, “Wherever I go, I carry home on my back.” In that chapter, she is referencing how we as writers, as Chicanx, have to be like turtles. We need to carry connections to art and to our ancestors to protect us, to have a sense of home—I think about that a lot.

I’ll get to images and objects in a moment. But before we get there, if you were to speak to a high school class of graduates right now, people who
are leaving high school and considering maybe going to college, maybe not, or maybe they’re curious, what would you tell them? What would be your message to them?

That they are worth trying new things. That their community value is largely in the experiences they open themselves up to and honoring the experiences they would enter college with. I would encourage them to go for it, especially if they may be coming from a space where college might seem out of reach, or if they are worried they won’t fit in. Despite numbers of Latinx students in college in the U.S. being historically higher, our numbers are still in the minority, and these spaces can be very intimidating. Representation is important, but not just professor representation, students in historically marginalized demographics need to be visible. Now is the time to try new things and bring your unique perspective because if you don’t, someone else is going to miss out. The larger community misses out if you do not allow yourself to be in a particular space and or in a particular field. Their presence in social institutions brings the gift of growth and the gift of diverse perspective.

That’s really beautiful. So, let’s get back to this symbol. And I don’t know if you want to go back to your turtle or not. My final question to you is based on some image, some visual symbol, some object that is important to you that represents some of who you are and what you do. If you want to talk more about your turtle, or about something else.

Oh man, I feel like this is going to sound like a really basic answer because now images of cacti are everywhere and got super trendy. But as a kid, we always ate nopales [edible cactus] at my abuelitos’ [grandfather’s] house. My grandfather grew them in the backyard. He taught me how to cut the paddles and how to remove the spines so that you don’t hurt yourself. The image of the cactus crops up in my writing over and over again, almost subconsciously. In fact, I’m working on a new manuscript currently and I’m seeing it again. Hopefully, I’m not wearing this image out ... It has resonance for me in the way that there is balance in the sharpness and defense provided by the spines, its ability to protect itself and insert itself in the space surrounding and contain the soft, hydrating inside. Something wonderful about this plant is that it grows both up and out. The healthier the plant is, the more space it takes up. So often in this culture, certain people are asked to take up less space. The cactus is inspirational in the way that it grows and how it can grow in difficult terrain. That
tough exterior is necessary to protect the softness beneath the skin. Neither the softness can thrive, nor can the tough outer exterior, without the other. Both are necessary. This works as a model for people, you can’t just be hard, defensive, and sharp, there needs to be sweetness inside. I feel like that’s a pretty cheesy image object.

No, it’s a great metaphor, with the combination of those different elements. Do you have a particular cactus in mind? Do you have an image of a cactus or a photo that you like?

I can probably send one. I’ve actually been planning a cactus tattoo. My abuelo passed recently. It’s going to be a memorial tattoo. I have been trying to find a picture of the specific cactus from the backyard. I’ve been asking everyone, but no one can find a picture, though everyone remembers it. He (my grandfather) used to put sunglasses on it for some unknown reason; he could be a very fun, silly person. Since nobody can find a picture, I’ve been scouring the internet for one that looks closest to my memory. I’ve also been trying to sketch one. So, I’m sure I can send something.

You’ll put sunglasses on it?

Hah! Maybe I’ll try to draw one.

That would be great. Can I go back to your other tattoo, your turtle? Tell me more about it. What made you draw that tattoo? Was it after your graduation or before graduation?

It was between my defense and the graduation ceremony. Tattoos are very important to me, as they are for many people. Their connection to issues of class has shifted over time, but they’ve long been culturally
significant in terms of marking important movement in one’s life: loss and gain, externalizing memory on the body. I find that a powerful metaphor because we all carry history with us. Some of it is visible and some of it is not, so this kind of an outward expression is important to me. I have a number of tattoos for different important moments in my life, but that one in particular is one of my favorites.

When I started my MA in Indiana is when I first read Borderlands and it blew my mind. It literally changed everything about how I wrote. Initially I was trying to write like canonical, Eurocentric writers. Writers who are not from California, who are not working-class, Chicanx, who weren’t urban. Then I read Anzaldúa and it was like she was saying, “Your story is meaningful.” More specifically, the contradictions in your story are meaningful. It was the first time I had lived outside California and away from cultural touchstones. That book really got me through that time and it continued to through my studies in Nebraska. And I’ve always loved turtles. So the image of that turtle carrying its home was imprinted in the back of my mind.

The book on the turtle’s back in the tattoo came from her explanation of art and literature, but also represents the physical book, Borderlands. That book was like a place of shelter for me. It just kind of made sense to put it all together. My drawing was terrible, but I lucked out in finding an artist who listened to my explanation, then just sketched it, right there. Like he could see what I was picturing.

“Tattoos are very important to me, as they are for many people. Their connection to issues of class has shifted over time, but they’ve long been culturally significant in terms of marking important movement in one’s life: loss and gain, externalizing memory on the body.”
Joana, you are the first participant who is originally Brazilian and the first one from the School of Dentistry, so it’s great to have you be part of the Latinx Recognition this year. Can you tell me a bit about what you do, and what in particular you are being recognized for this year?

I am a research associate professor at the Dental School and also at the School of Public Health. I’ve been at the University of Washington for about fifteen years, and I’m a dentist and epidemiologist, so I do research in public health and oral health.

Tell me what is something that you’re very proud of in the work that you’ve been doing.

My research is in oral health inequities, and I’m trying to find solutions or trying to reduce the inequities. So I’m using implementation science, behavioral science, and system science to understand and to try to mitigate the effects of health disparities. We know that Latinx and African American and Indigenous people have worse health, particularly oral health, than the rest of the population. I do research to understand those things. I recently announced a pilot trial where we were delivering...
water bottles to families of kids who had extensive tooth decay—they had to go to the hospital to have surgery to fix their teeth. We did an intervention in which we were helping them to change dietary habits, their diets, and reduce soda consumption. That was very exciting. It was very well accepted in the Yakima Valley. Kids were really excited to receive their water bottles at home and they were able to change their drinking habits, and really they did really great, so it was exciting to finish that pilot study.

I also work with Indigenous people in Alaska—a tribal healthcare organization in Southeast Alaska, and we’re trying to see if using data would improve care delivery. I’m trying to think about how we can look at the data that they are generating and bring it back to them to reflect and to change practices. So those are the two main projects that I’ve been working on. One of the publications that I did was looking at implementation factors, readiness to implement change in a dental care organization that’s serving Alaska Native children for dental care. This is the one I’m being recognized for this year.

That’s excellent. Can you tell me a bit of how you ended up coming to the UW? How does a Brazilian woman like you end up in the faculty of the UW?

Well, I came to the UW to do a part of my PhD. The Brazilian government sponsors you during your PhD to go abroad for a year, so that’s what I did. I came to the University of Washington, and I started doing research there as part of my PhD in the department that used to be Dental Public Health and now is Oral Health Sciences. I’ve been doing research there, and I started getting engaged with research grants. I went back, finished my PhD, did my defense in Rio, and then came back to the UW as a research visiting scholar, so that’s how I started. And I kept getting grants or being in grants with other people, and doing research, doing data analysis, planning studies, implementing them, so that’s how I ended up staying. It was a year-by-year thing in the beginning, and thinking the first five to seven years, it was all about, ‘Oh, how long are you staying here?’ and I would say, ‘Five years.’ Then people would ask me again, ‘How long are you staying here?’ and I would say, ‘Five years.’ And it’s been sixteen years.

It was not an all-easy path, I am sure. So on that path from doing your PhD to spending time in the US and then coming back and staying, bit by bit,
what kind of things helped you overcome obstacles that you encountered? I would say a great dose of ingenuity and optimism. I just kept going. Just keep on plowing ahead.

Yeah, I’m not sure. Because I wouldn’t say that the system helped me or that there were specific people. There was some support during the way but not necessarily that made me stay. I think it was a big dose of ingenuity, like being naive, optimistic.

*Think of those kids in the Yakima Valley that participated in the water bottle program that you were doing, and imagine many of them graduating from high school now. Suppose that you are invited to speak to those high school graduates in the Yakima Valley right now. What would you tell them? What would be your message of inspiration and encouragement at this point in their lives?*

In terms of pursuing a graduate degree, or of being in the dental field, or being Latina?

Your choice.

I think we cannot ignore the times that we are living now in terms of the Coronavirus pandemic, and how important the health field is, and how much recognition we are having now that it is an important field. This is not only for you to be in the clinic serving people and improving their health, but also as a researcher trying to understand what is causing the disease and what is happening in the world right now, trying to understand that and trying to help find the solutions. So I would say to them that pursuing further education could be an exciting thing, it is exciting to be part of this, especially as you think about what career or what path to take.

*Let me ask you one last question. If you were to think of some image, a picture, a drawing, a photo, or sculpture, an object that somehow represents your accomplishment as a Latina at the UW or the work you do, something that*
represents who you are and what you do, what would that image be?

Hmm. That’s a tricky question. I’m not sure.

What is the first thing that comes to your mind?

What’s coming to my mind is I’m doing like a systems course where they talk about a U shape; it’s called the U theory, where you go through stages of observing something, and leaving this and feeling that, and then coming out of it with a new knowledge and a new experience. I think it’s quite complex, but they have a picture that is coming to my mind. That’s quite significant to me right now because I feel that a lot of times we are downloading a lot of information but not actually feeling or acting on it, and this U shape brings you to think about how one not only downloads but starts generating new things.

This is related to my path at the UW because I think when I came, I was downloading a lot, I was observing and learning and getting as much information as I could, coming from Brazil and everything was new—the culture, the work style, the knowledge that was going on, and I feel that I’ve been through that, the download phase. I’ve been through this sensing phase where I felt a lot and let go. Now I’m enacting and generating new things based on that accumulated knowledge. So I think that’s my path so far at the UW and in the United States.
Thank you, Sonia, for agreeing to participate in this. This is a great opportunity to get to hear more about your work and the work that so many other great Latinx faculty at the UW have done. To get us started, why don’t you tell us a bit more about why you’re being recognized in a way that everybody will understand because we’re from different disciplines. What is your work, and why are you being recognized this year?

If I can be completely honest with you, I am not sure who nominated me, so I don’t know what part of my work was actually suggested for this award. There are two projects that I’ve been heavily working on within this last year that I think would speak to this particular year’s nomination. One has to do with my creative project, which is titled The Care Revolution, which is looking at home health care in the state of Oregon. That was part of my research for the last couple years, which really sort of culminated in the production of a documentary film, which looks at the way in which home care workers in the state of Oregon, unlike Washington, weren’t professionalized. The state did not recognize home care workers as an occupation until workers started organizing their union and building their own voice as a way to legitimize the profession and also create a system for institutionalizing the home care worker occupation so they can receive some of the benefits that other workers have the right to receive, so the film is really a sort of an overview of how workers began to organize their union and in the process, really, it speaks to the sort of labor, very sort of emotional labor, that comes into play when providing home care.

That project actually has been circulating now for a little bit in different
film festivals, academic conferences, and recently it’s been shown in a documentary labor film festival in Taiwan, and it was shown in Canada as well. So we’ve been able to get some both national and international circulation, and we’ve been hearing back from people about the different ways in which it has spoken to them and starting to find these really interesting connections in the way home health care is viewed really across the nation and globally. So that has been really one of my core projects for this last year, which I think is the one that maybe I was nominated for because I’ve been very visible with that. But this particular year I was also able to publish a collaborative book chapter that speaks to the experiences of women of color in academia, particularly in this neoliberal environment we live in and while attempting to organize our union at a university where I was before UW-Tacoma. So those two pieces of work are the fruits of last year’s labor, and this year as well. I think either one of these works might have driven this specific nomination.

Well, they are both good work that warrants the nomination, so congratulations for both. It’s really excellent to have you doing that kind of work, and especially one that results in the documentary film, which is not a conventional academic product, so I’m glad that we’re also doing that as part of the Latinx experience at the UW.

Yes, it’s been a busy year, for sure.

So it’s been a big year, but it’s a big thing to have you a Latina woman on the faculty at the UW. How did you end up here? How does one become a Latina faculty at the UW?

Sometimes I wonder myself how it all happens. It’s been interesting for me. I reflect on how I’ve gotten here and the way I have moved in my life. I was born in the States, but raised in Mexico, so I did a sort of reverse migration. After completing my high school education in Mexico, I decided I wanted to attend college and I came back to the US as a young adult. I lived in California for a while, and I got my bachelor’s and my master’s at San Francisco State University. Later—I’m fast-forwarding—I applied for my doctoral degree at the University of Oregon in Eugene, so I spent my doctoral years there, graduated from the School of Journalism and Communication at the UO, and I stayed as a teaching instructor one year after I graduated and while I was on the job market. My first official job as tenure-track professor was at a liberal arts institution in Olympia,
where I spent two years. My book chapter references the time I spent at this institution. There were some efforts to organize a union. It was a very contentious university environment, and I quickly knew that it wasn’t necessarily going to be my home, so I worked there for two years, but decided—it was a bit of an oppressive environment working at that institution—I decided to leave without having anything laid out in terms of another academic job. I left and worked for an entire year on the home care worker documentary, so I was able to do a lot of research, a lot of editing of the creative work. I was very much part of every single facet of the film. I was the primary editor, and did part of the shooting of the film and worked on building the narrative, etc. So I dedicated my time doing that while I was also looking for teaching positions.

I was living a little in Olympia at the time when I came across the posting for UWT job, and to be honest, I was really, really elated to read about the position because it spoke directly to me in that UW Tacoma was interested in having somebody engage in media activism in a theoretical sense, but they were also seeking somebody could do community-engaged work, who had a production skills and able to teach skill-based courses within communications in our division. So I was happy to come across this specific position because unlike others that I’ve seen in my field, it’s quite unique to find a tenure-track position in which there are expectations to engage in both of these areas of scholarship-- traditional scholarship and creative work, which I come to see as both formal parts of my scholarship, because there are varying degrees of research and evaluation involved in them. It takes different forms, but that is all to say that as soon as I saw the UWT posting, I applied for the job, made the cut, visited campus, and I really liked the environment there. I really enjoyed meeting some of the people who are now my colleagues. So I kept my fingers crossed, hoping that everything went OK. And it did, thankfully. So coming back to what I was saying earlier, I sort of have been traveling north throughout the last twenty years of my life, moving upward from Mexico to California, then to Oregon and now Washington. I hope that this is it.

OK, stop here; don’t keep going north to BC.

So that’s how I arrived after some tumultuous time that really taught me a lot of lessons about working in academia, learning a little bit more about my own teaching style and my true interest in terms of the things that I want to do. I’ve been really lucky to have landed this position here
in the place where I feel there’s so much to do still.

Now, I’m pretty sure that on that path north from Mexico to California to Oregon to Washington, it hasn’t been a smooth ride. There have been all sorts of bumps and obstacles in the room. Rather than focusing on the obstacles, I’d like to ask you about what kind of things you found helped you overcome obstacles as you were moving forward in your career and your path north or in your path to become an academic at the UW. What helps you deal with the obstacles?

Being surrounded by a community of people where we can have a sense of shared values. This is the end of my second year at UWT, so I’m still working through things and finding community, affinity with my colleagues, but building community in every place where I’ve been has been critical to overcoming particular obstacles, because it’s not only about the ways in which we feel supported, but about the ways in which the work that we do can be understood, shared and validated. For example, in doing creative work, documentary film is something that for me, pulls together both of my passion for research, having a voice and learning about new things. I also enjoy speaking to people and engaging in community-engaged projects, so working with community is always one of these things that very selfishly fuels the heart in a way, but I also think that it also acts as a constant reminder that community-engaged work is needed, and there is a place for it and that through it, there can be actual transformation of people, community, and other things.

Knowing that there’s so much work that needs to be done is what keeps me going, wanting to be engaged and feel that I’m part of a community—whether that has to do with thinking about education, or labor, or human rights or social justice issues.”
work! That, for me, is what keeps me going. I like to be engaged with the community, and I used to be, before coming back to higher education, a labor organizer, so I like and understand the need and significance of this type of work. I have worked with unions, and so there’s a certain dynamic that I got used to and that I really enjoy. And I always strive to carry the sense of community-building into the classroom.

So let’s imagine that you keep on moving north, but only a tiny bit. And you’re invited to give a graduation speech at a high school in Mount Vernon, or in Bellingham, a bit further north, but not much, where there’s a lot of first-generation students graduating from high school, a lot of academic students. What would you tell them about prospects for higher education and moving forward in their lives. What would be your message to a class of graduating high-schoolers?

That’s a big one. One of the things that I would definitely want to communicate to youth would be not only to not lose sense of their education, but to be persistent and patient with the things that they do. Thinking about first-generation students, which is the majority of the Latino students that we see coming into higher education in this state, life tends to be very messy, very complicated. Many students, especially Latino students, I feel are either working and going to school, plus the dynamics of family life that complicate youth existence, plus coming into adulthood. I would ask them to not lose sight of getting an education, because although they might not see immediate life changes while going through it, it does make a change for their future. I mean, certainly I’m a first-generation kid, who worked, went to school, had to support a parent, and then I had to support myself independently as I was moving through my bachelor’s and my masters degrees. I know what the experience is like and I can sympathize.

It’s really easy to put education aside, but ever since graduating from my bachelor’s and then my master’s, I never really thought that I was going to earn a PhD. It wasn’t necessarily in my cards in the beginning. But as I began to fall in love with education, I decided to continue. I have seen the effects of having an education over and over again.

I wouldn’t be in the place I am now had I not continued with my education, meaning, being in the privileged position as an assistant professor, at UWT and living in the Pacific Northwest. And I think that for Latinos in this country, one of the ways in which we can have a stronger voice and
we can see the upward mobility of our communities is with an education. We need Latinos in public spaces or public offices for example, so the needs of our community are heard, and our needs are distinct from other communities’, so I would say, ‘Keep on, and don’t lose sight of it, and you will not regret it.’ I guess I could always also say, ‘You are transformative power for the next generation,’ which they are, but I think that also having a college education is going to change their life in ways that they have not even thought about. ‘Be persistent and stay focused.’ That is what I would say.

Thank you. That is very good. Now I have one last question that I think you will resonate with because I tend to be very visual and I like to visualize things, and so my question is what is an image, an object, a drawing, a picture that you could say helps you represent who you are as a Latina in academia or what your trajectory is? What is an image that comes to mind? It doesn’t have to be perfect. What is the first thing that comes to your mind?

My obsession with Frida Kahlo.

Tell me more about Frida.

You know, her image has been so hyper-commercialized that sometimes talking about it makes me feel a little bit like [cringes]. But since I was very young, I was really passionate about her work, and the more I learned about the ways in which she pushed boundaries in a particular period of time when behaving in certain ways or believing in certain things was not expected or accepted for women, I guess, that drew me to her. To me, her story resonated as something that was very different from what is expected of women in Mexican society. So learning about Frida while I was an adolescent, got me to question my own place as women. ’ You know, in Latin American countries, and in Mexico most definitely, I lived in a very traditional, conservative family, so for me, it was all about getting married, having kids.

But when I did not follow that pattern, my family was puzzled, and I think they are still scratching their heads about how I decided to be, essentially, non-traditional. So I guess I always saw her [Frida] as an image of strength, and I have an actual picture of her that I’ve had since I was fourteen years old that I still own. And I always have it in my kitchen because this is a space where I spend most of my time, and I love to see
that image of her in the space I most enjoy in the house. Let me show you because it’s right here. So I’ve had this since I was like fourteen years old, and it’s for me, it’s a very demure posture he has in this image. I love having it around because it reminds me of strength. So for me, this image has been an inspiration.

I am a bit surprised that it’s not one of her very colorful paintings, but this black and white picture of her.

Yeah. I found it in a local market in Tonalá, Jalisco, which is close to the city of Guadalajara where I grew up. I remember that market fondly. And I’ve had this image since high school. It has some little minor tears and things, but it’s just been with me for a long time, and maybe that’s part of it, that it’s something that I’ve held onto since growing up in Mexico, which is a place that I consider home, despite the fact that on paper, I was born in the US. That was a really good question. I haven’t thought about it really ever in that way, so thank you for asking that.
Thank you for joining us for this exploration of Latino experiences in the UW faculty.

Thank you very much for having me here and for letting me be a part of this event. It is an honor for me.

So why don’t you tell me first about the work that you are being recognized for? What is the work that you do, told in plain language, in a way that anybody would understand? Something I could describe to my grandmother.

Well, it will really help if your grandmother likes playing slot machines or going to the casino at all. I don’t know if that is the case, but let’s say that your grandmother likes to play, go to the casino, and play on the slot machines. OK, so when playing with slot machines, there are different slot machines that you can try, and they are supposed to pay out with different probabilities. Some might be more likely to pay, and some others may perhaps be biased in favor of the casino, not your grandma.

The problem that a person faces when playing in the casino is knowing, for this specific slot machine that I am sitting at, whether the chances are in my favor or not. Of course, that is something that we do not know, and the casino would not want you to know, because otherwise it would be easy to trick them and to game the system. So as a gambler, the problem that you face is, “Which machine should I try next? If I have been trying unsuccessfully, is the next quarter going to be the jackpot or should I switch to a different machine that hopefully will be more profitable for me?” So that is the problem, and that is the kind of problem that I explore
in the work that is being recognized today.

So, what we look at is essentially how should your grandma, or the person at the casino, decide how long to try on a given slot machine before switching to a different one, when they obviously would like to find the best machine. But they are also more comfortable with the machines that they have already tried, because at least they have some experience with them. So, there are two things going on here. On the one hand, you want to be on the slot machine that will pay out the most amount of money, and you want to be in one that is familiar, and you are not sure which one it is.

So, if the machine that you are currently gambling at is not really paying out, it may be that there is a better machine that you should try. It also means that on this machine, you have some experience—you know if you have been close to hitting the jackpot or not. Whereas in a new machine, it would be starting over. The idea is how long should you stick to the current machine that you are on, and when should you switch to try a different one. Or maybe a different casino altogether. Considering that new opportunities are unexplored, and that can be intimidating or scary.

So if I read your paper, I would know how to win at the slot machine?

Unfortunately, I cannot guarantee that that would be the case. That also depends on the details of the different slot machines at the actual casinos. But what my paper will tell you is how long is it reasonable to stick to one machine before deciding to switch to a different one, and how you should observe your past earnings or losses in order to make that decision. I can’t guarantee that you will win. My paper will not show you how to win for sure; otherwise, it would be a very different type of paper and target audience. But my paper will give you an idea of how long it is reasonable to give to the current slot machine, and when should odds be better in your favor if you switch to a different machine.

Just to make sure I am understanding you, if anybody is interested in winning more at the casino, they should read the paper, because you will not tell it to us here in this interview, but they can find the answer in the paper. And if they cite the paper, even better, because then you will get tenure. [Laughs.] I’m joking, of course.
That is another way of putting it.

_It’s good to have a sense of what you are doing. In addition to what you are doing, tell me a bit more about how you ended up here doing this. How does a Latino guy from Argentina, like you, end up at the University of Washington Bothell faculty, doing this kind of work?_

Well, I think that is a matter of a mixture of my own career inclinations and desires and obviously circumstances. I was born and raised in Argentina, and even from an early age, I always felt the most comfortable at school. School was like my safe haven. I loved being a student and I knew that I wanted to stay in school, whichever way I could. So, what happened was that after graduating, I had the opportunity to do a master’s in Argentina. To do a little bit of grad school. It was fortunate that I received a research scholarship, because I did my undergraduate at a public school. Public school there means absolutely free college education, unlike public colleges here. But then I got the scholarship to pursue a master’s at a private school, which was awfully expensive. I would not have been able to afford it otherwise. It brought me closer to the lifestyle and the day to day work of a full-time professor. This is something that we did not have so much in the private school, because most faculty there had full-time jobs elsewhere. At this private school is where I discovered the life of the full-time professor, and I knew that is what I wanted for my life.

In that school, we often had visiting professors from schools in the United States, and from them I learned about the possibility of applying for a PhD program. I didn’t even know that there was an option for me at the time, but one of my professors there encouraged me to apply, and wrote letters of recommendation for me. I was fortunate enough to be accepted into Stanford for my PhD program.

The rest is sort of history. That is how I got to the US. Then when I graduated, my first position was a postdoctoral fellowship in Italy, so I moved to Italy for two years. And after that was up, I went on the job market again, and that is when I got the job offer from the University of Washington, Bothell. So, it is not so much that I was necessarily looking to move to this area. It was just the job that attracted me here. In fact, at the time that my postdoc was up in Italy, I also interviewed with schools in other parts of Europe, in England and in Italy, and in other places in the United States, so what was going to happen after that was a big question mark.
Ultimately, the offer that I got from Bothell was the offer that spoke to me the most. And that is how I am here.

Excellent, our win at the University of Washington. Now, as we speak, you are preparing your tenure application?

Correct, yes, I have almost all my documents ready and I am starting the formal application procedures.

OK, well good luck with that one. If you look back at the last few years, your path between your undergraduate and master’s in Argentina, then your PhD and postdoc, and now into the faculty at UW, I can anticipate that the road was not always easy. Rather than focusing on the problems, or the obstacles along the road, I want to ask you about what are the kinds of things that help you overcome obstacles as they come up on your path. What are the kinds of things that you make use of or that help you to overcome obstacles?

Well, and especially in the early stages of my career, I would have to say my family. Because even though growing up, and around the time I was in my undergraduate school, the financial situation in my household was stressful, money was tight, never in a single moment did my parents ask me to drop out of school or switch to part time to get a job, even when money was very tight. I still have their full support to remain a full-time student, and I think that, without a doubt, that was what allowed me to not only keep up my grades, but also keep my engagement in school, and what ultimately led me to be accepted into the master’s program, which then led to graduate school. So definitely my family. Unfortunately, when I moved to the United States, I was by myself. All my family was and still is in Argentina. I think at that point the support from my classmates in graduate school was also key.

Now, I noticed that as part of your work on diversity and equity and community engagement, you have a project to facilitate access to university for low-income, first-generation high school students. One of the questions that I’ve been asking from people in this project is what you would tell a group of first-generation high school graduates about higher education. You actually have experience dealing with them. What are your recommendations for high school graduates from low-income, first-generation families to consider access to higher education and to go to a place like the University of Washington?
Well, I think I would say two things. First, going to university and being able to pursue my graduate studies changed my life. It allowed me to go places and do things that I never even imagined were possible. And I think that even if not everyone wants to end up being a professor in academia, like I did, that is not the point. The point is that going through school and accessing these opportunities can help you change your life and help you pursue your dreams, and I think one of the most important things from my experience was that even when I was finishing my undergraduate studies and thinking about applying for the master’s, I had heard of people getting PhDs, but I had no idea that there was even an option for me to do that. It was not until in the middle of my master’s that my professors there encouraged me and told me that this is something that you can aspire to for yourself, that is something that you could do, and they were obviously supportive. Eventually, it became a reality.

I think a lot of people, especially first-generation students or students that come from low-income households, might have this idea that some of those opportunities that are out there are just not available for them. Of course, not everyone might be as lucky as I was to have such a supportive family system, but I think that is where the outreach work that I and my other colleagues in the Council are trying to do: to make students aware that these are options that they can access, that they are available for them, and be as much support and help and accompaniment as possible, when for one reason or another, their family system is not able to provide all the support that the students might need.

*I think that is valuable, and especially, very useful.*

I think that is what I would say the main idea of our project is: to bring these opportunities out for students who, because of their background, might think that it is completely inaccessible for them. Also, we need to provide the guidance and support, not only during the admissions process, or telling them what schools are like, because I think most schools have support through the admission process itself, but it is also...
important to help them take the first step. And then, once they are in university, making sure that their needs and their challenges are met, so that they can succeed throughout.

That is cool. One final question I have for you is based on an image, a drawing, an object, even if it is imaginary, that represents your path as a Latino in the University of Washington. What would that image be?

That something that I read on the on the email inviting me to the interview. I tried to think about it. I am not sure it is something that I thought about much, but I guess what I would have to say is a mental picture of me sitting quietly, looking at the cherry blossoms and eating alfajores. I am not much of a mate person, I do not have a lot of family traditions that I keep here, but alfajores de dulce de leche (caramel) are my thing. One of the things I miss the most about Argentina, aside from my family of course.

And why on the Arts Quad with the cherry blossoms?

Because I think I think that is a staple of the University of Washington, especially with Mount Rainier in the background. It has elements of the Pacific Northwest, which is what my life is right now, but my roots are still represented by the alfajores.

“I couldn’t get alfajores, but I have my mate.”
Dr. Deborah Fuller

PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF MICROBIOLOGY

GRANTS
» CD180-targeted immunotherapeutic for chronic HBV in HIV-infected patients
» Programming protective immunity by targeting antigens to the CD180 receptor
» Universal influenza A/B vaccine

PUBLICATIONS
» “Amplifying RNA Vaccine Development”
» “Engagement of monocytes, NK cells and CD4+ Th1 cells by ALVAC-SIV vaccination results in a decreased risk of SIVmac251 vaginal acquisition. PLoS Pathogens”
» “Multimeric epitope-scaffold HIV vaccine target V1V2 and differentially tune polyfunctional antibody responses”
» “Transient immune activation associated with BCG vaccination of infant rhesus macaques is not sufficient to influence oral SIV infection”
» “Infection of rhesus macaques results in persistent viral replication and induces intestinal immunopathology”
» “Mucosal T helper 17 and T regulatory cell homeostasis correlates with acute SIV viremia and responsiveness to antiretroviral therapy in macaques”

Deb, please tell me what you’re being recognized for, explained in plain language. What is the work that you do in microbiology?

I work on vaccines, and in the past year, even just this past week, I’ve had a number of manuscripts published related to my work in vaccine discovery and development. As of last week, even more funding came through to apply our vaccine strategies towards CoVID-19. People have probably become more familiar with the nature of my work through CoVID-19, and the fact that there are vaccine clinical trials going on now. One of the very first vaccine clinical trials, which started right here in Seattle, was for an RNA vaccine. That is actually very close to the same types of vaccines that I work on.

I work on what we call nucleic acid vaccines which include both DNA and RNA vaccines. Since the early 1990s, I’ve been working on this vaccine platform and more recently as a strategy to rapidly respond to emerging
pandemics including COVID-19. In simple terms, DNA is your coding material of all living things. Some viruses have DNA and some have RNA. DNA transcribes RNA and then RNA makes all the proteins and building blocks in all living things including viruses.

When we first started working on DNA vaccines in the early 1990s, my colleagues and I wondered what would happen if we inserted the coding sequences for proteins pathogens directly into a person’s own cells, would their own cells end up producing that vaccine? It worked and in animals we showed that we got immune responses to the protein expressed by the DNA vaccine. That gave birth to the concept of nucleic acid vaccines. You can either take DNA, and that would code the RNA, and then code the protein for the vaccine. Or you can take the RNA and put that directly into the host cells in a person’s own cells and they’ll produce the protein. Then, the body will recognize it and generate immune responses.

We’re used to vaccines where you get the pathogen and you either kill it, or you attenuate it, and then you inject the pathogen into people, which causes an immune response. With RNA based vaccines we don’t need the pathogen. All we need is the genetic sequence from the pathogen. As soon as a viral sequence is known, we can quickly make a vaccine. Therefore, nucleic acid vaccines have gone to the front of the line to rapidly respond to the CoVID-19 pandemic. When the sequence of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes CoVID-19, was published in January, we were able to make vaccines within a week and show the vaccine induced immune responses within 3 weeks.

My lab has also developed a delivery technology that allows us to efficiently inject DNA and RNA coding sequences into our own skin cells to generate an immune response. We had already been working on this platform to develop a new influenza vaccine because the flu always poses a threat as a future pandemic and we wanted to be ready should that happen. The new flu vaccine we’re designing would protect against future pandemics unlike our current flu vaccine that only protects against the strain of flu that is currently circulating. We had built up our platform and technologies aimed at being ready for a flu pandemic so when CoVID-19 emerged in January, we were ready and able to plug into it very quickly. And that has, of course, led to me being very busy lately.

This time you’re being recognized for all that work that you’ve done recently. Next time, I hope you will be recognized for being the one who led the invention
That’s right. Yeah. We are very close to moving our lead vaccine into clinical trials, so hopefully, we’ll start vaccinating people sometime in the Fall. Right now, we’re immunizing monkeys as a preclinical model that closely resembles humans in their response to vaccination. We are testing to make sure it’s going to be safe and that it induces the response that we want. We already had papers that were published related to our vaccine platform in its application for influenza. We’ve just pivoted to apply the same concepts towards CoVID-19.

Excellent. Now, how does a Latina woman like you end up doing this type of stuff at the UW? What path brought you to the UW to do this kind of work?

I always tell people I did everything backwards. I started with a career first and then I ended up in a postdoctoral period of sorts, and then I got my PhD last. It seems really weird, doesn’t it?

My family were workers and laborers. My dad worked on a farm and then in a factory, and my mom worked for social security as a translator. I was the first kid in our extended family to go to college. Because we’re Puerto Rican, my extended family is quite large. I have lots of cousins and aunts and uncles and siblings.

The idea that I would go to college instead of entering the workforce was unusual for my family, at the time. We didn’t have a lot of money, so I had to work full time to put myself through college. I decided I wanted to get a medical degree, but after interviewing at medical school I realized I was more interested in the science behind the medicine. Some of my advisors said I should get a PhD, so I applied and got into the University Wisconsin’s PhD Program. I started my PhD in toxicology, but because I was so burned out from working full time and going to school at the same time, I had to withdraw from my PhD program within a year. I wasn’t working on my degree and was out of a job, so I got an entry level position at a biotech company in Madison, Wisconsin. It was a plant genetic engineering company that worked on transgenic crops. I got a job in the greenhouse planting seeds.

I worked there for 10 years but that experience launched my career. The company had developed a technology to insert genes into plants, and it got
me thinking, along with some colleagues, that maybe we can also insert genes into people. I played around with their technology and effectively delivered it into animals. At the time, we were thinking we could apply this to gene therapy. Then a new colleague joined the company and I showed him data where I was having problems with the gene therapy because we kept getting an immune response induced against the protein. For gene therapy, you don’t want an immune response because it will get rid of the therapeutic effects of the gene. But my colleague immediately saw its potential application as a vaccine in its ability to generate immune responses.

We then set out to further explore and optimize this strategy and as a result, my colleague and I helped to launch a new field of nucleic acid vaccines in the early 1990s. I ended up working for the company for 10 years, developing that technology and the vaccine platforms that I’m still using. I didn’t have a PhD at the time but because the technology and concept took hold and rapidly spread, I was able to establish a career, having my own lab as a principal investigator, patenting new innovations and publishing papers as the senior author even without a PhD. Everybody got interested in our technology, so I traveled all over the world. I introduced people to our technology and tried it with different infectious diseases. I was learning and bettering myself in other researchers’ labs. I call that time my “postdoctoral period.” Then one of my collaborators thought that it was just crazy how I had all this international recognition, but I didn’t have a PhD. She offered me an opportunity to get a PhD in her lab. I thought about it and decided maybe it was time to do it. But the company didn’t want me to go, so they suggested I find a mentor at the University of Wisconsin that would help me so that I could stay with the company even while I worked on earning my PhD. One of my collaborators at the University of Wisconsin agreed to take me on. It wasn’t an easy decision because my first son was only a year old at the time but it was an opportunity that I wasn’t sure would come again and my husband was very supportive.

So I applied to their graduate school. I got into the PhD Program and continued to work full time for the biotech company. It took about 2 ½ years to get my PhD. and then I stayed with the company for another 4 years. In total, I was in biotech for 17 years. The biotech company had a successful phase-one clinical trial for the first vaccine. It got the attention of Pfizer pharmaceutical company and they acquired the company. That’s when I exited biotech and moved into academia. I started as an Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh in 2004, then an
Associate Professor at Albany Medical College in 2007, and then came to the University of Washington. At that time, I was working primarily on HIV vaccines, and the UW is one of the top places in the world to do HIV vaccine research. So, that’s how I landed here in 2010.

Excellent. Now I can see why you said you did things backwards, or the other way around. I’m sure it was not always easy. But rather than focusing on the obstacles, let’s talk about what helped you overcome them. What kind of things helped you overcome obstacles as you progressed in your career as a Latina in academia and biotech?

Having great mentors. People who became committed to me and believed in me. They helped open doors that normally would not have been, or that I couldn’t have opened myself. The relationships, partnerships and bonds that are formed with the various mentors at every step of the way. They stuck their neck out for me. Because I was very unusual, in terms of being a woman and a Latina back then and also my unconventional career track, it was more of a challenge. Sometimes when you pair up with mentors and you’re very successful, the mentors will take some of that credit. Instead, my mentors constantly deferred saying “It’s Deb. She’s the one who’s really pushing this program forward.” That helped to open doors and allowed me to, for example, to be promoted to a PhD level position in biotech without even having the degree. That’s very unusual to do. Those people believing in me and supporting me is what made the biggest difference.

I always tell my students that a lot of it is hard work, obviously. Everybody works hard to get their education and work in a lab, but some of it is luck. So, it was ending up with the right person, at the right time, and getting mentors that could help bring me forward.

“Even if people around you say ‘You can’t do that. There are too many barriers and obstacles for you.' Don’t listen to people telling you that you can’t make it or that it’s not going to make you money. Stick to your guns and believe in yourself.”

Imagine you’re invited to give a graduation ceremony speech to a high school where there are a lot of first-generation Latinx students. What would you tell them? What do you tell yourself as a high school student?
Follow your passions. Sometimes when you’re that young, especially if you come from a challenging family situation, you get a lot of pressure to get a good job, make some money, or to have a good marriage. But you got to follow your heart and your own passions. Even if people around you say “You can’t do that. There are too many barriers and obstacles for you.” Don’t listen to people telling you that you can’t make it or that it’s not going to make you money. Stick to your guns and believe in yourself. If you follow your passion, you will be successful at what you do.

Also, find a good mentor. Some people end up with bad mentors and they try very hard to please them. Recognize a bad mentor and don’t stay in that situation. Make sure that that person is helping you work and move towards your goals.

Thank you for sharing your story, and good luck with the important work that you do. I hope that the next recognition will be that you have figured out the vaccine for CoVID-19 and that it will make you a very famous person, not only in the community.

Yeah, that’s it. I talked to my mom yesterday and she goes, “Well what are you working on?” I said “Well, I’m working on saving the world, Mom.” And she was laughing. If I don’t believe I can do it, I don’t know who will.

At work in the lab.
Angelina, I am happy to have you as part of this project again this year.

Thanks for having me.

To get started, why don’t you tell us a bit about why you are being recognized? What is the work that you are being recognized for this year?

I do not actually know why I am being recognized. I assume it had something to do with my work. One area of focus with my work lately has been with immigrant rights here in Washington state. In national context, the crackdown on immigrant rights involves immigrants of all sorts, but of course, especially Latinx people. I assume that has something to do with the reason I am being recognized.

What is it that you are doing in relation to Latinx rights in Washington?

Well, I am the director of the University of Washington Center for Human Rights, and our mission is to work with human rights advocates on the front lines of human rights work. That means typically grassroots organizations in directly affected communities or leaders of those communities, as well as advocates like lawyers, social workers, policymakers—you name it. Our job is to conduct research that would help inform policy or help inform the advocacy work that others are doing.

That is our broad mission. Since 2017, underneath that general mission,
“It is important that everyone have access to courthouses. Folks need to be able to go to the court to defend themselves against charges that may be brought against them, to serve as witnesses in proceedings, or to file a restraining order if they are victims of abuse, or for any other reason; access to justice is a human right.”

we have been pursuing work on immigrant rights. I am working with organizations here in Washington state that are seeking to safeguard immigrants who are experiencing negative human rights impacts associated with this national crackdown on immigrant rights. In the last year, we published a report on immigration arrests at courthouses, which is a human rights concern because it is important that everyone have access to courthouses. Folks need to be able to go to the court to defend themselves against charges that may be brought against them, to serve as witnesses in proceedings, or to file a restraining order if they are victims of abuse, or for any other reason; access to justice is a human right. Recently, we have learned that Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol are oftentimes using courthouses as sites of arrests, and that is a grave concern.

We are also involved in research on deportations and detentions in Washington state and from Washington state. We also have an interest
in facilities that detain immigrant children or unaccompanied minors in our state and the human rights impacts.

Angelina, how does a Latina end up doing this kind of work? How did you end up as faculty at the University of Washington?

I always wanted to get a PhD and to conduct research on human rights, because I wanted to do impactful work. I wanted to stop human rights violations. I never really intended to be an academic. When I was finishing my dissertation, my dissertation chair told me, “Look, I know you don’t want to be a professor. You might want to just see if there may be some university out there that would be willing to let you not only be a professor and do the publish or perish and all that work, but also be involved in broader human rights advocacy. You might as well give it a shot or at least see what jobs are out there.”

I thought, “OK, I will do that,” and I looked at the job listings for available jobs and there were not many. Most of them were not of interest to me. However, there was one that really jumped out at me when I read it. It was a place that was looking for a scholar of human rights and a person involved in real-world human rights struggles. That was the position at University of Washington. I applied to that job and was incredibly lucky to be hired. I came here in the spirit of, “Well, I will try it out,” and I have been here now almost twenty years later. I love my job, and I feel extremely fortunate.

That task you do, and those twenty years leading up to it, were not all smooth and even, I’m sure. What has helped you during difficult times? What were the things that you reached out for to help you overcome obstacles on your path as an academic at the University of Washington?

I think for me the number one thing that helps me get through tough times is really related to doing work in human rights. The work brings us into contact with people who are struggling against much larger obstacles than I myself face, and are doing it with commitment and principles and courage, doing that work against all kinds of odds. So when I feel like things get tough for me, I have often looked to those who I most admire, who are usually people who have far fewer privileges than I have, yet they still fight—not only to get themselves ahead or get their families ahead, but to advance the concept of justice, for themselves and for their communities. That has always made me feel like I must do what I can,
from where I am at, to help support those broader causes. That is kind of how I have kept going.

That’s really good. If you were invited to give a graduation speech to a set of high school students, graduating in a place where there are a lot of first-generation Latino and Latina high school graduates who are wondering whether they should go on to higher education, what would you say to them?

I would say several things. One of them is that when entering into an environment where one is uncertain about one’s chances of getting ahead, or what obstacles might await, I think one of the things I have learned is that sometimes even when it seems tough, even just one person that you can talk to makes a huge difference. I try to tell students, “Look, you know you’re here talking to me, you can come and talk to me another day, or you can find another person that you can come talk to.” Sometimes in my life that has made a huge difference. Just that one person that I felt like at that moment, I could turn to some of those things. I encourage students to think about.

Also, I just think about what has gotten me through has been feeling my own struggles connected to a broader set of community struggles, and that has given me strength in times that are tough. I feel like sometimes we at the university do not forge those ties as well as we could. We may see something like going to university as “building your career” in a way that is distanced from the struggles of one’s community, and I think that it is not a good idea. The places that we come from and the families that got us here are what give us the strength to go forward, even if those people are not always deeply enmeshed in this institution that we are in now.

Would you be able to give me an example of some time when somebody helped you out?

Well, to be totally honest, when I was just saying that right now, I was
thinking there are times for me in the past year where you have been that one person, where I have felt like this. I faced a lot of challenges this past year because of a lawsuit brought against me which stems from my work in immigrant rights. That has been a hard challenge. I feel better about it now, but there were times when I really doubted myself, and at times it made all the difference to be able to identify specific people who I knew were on my side—not large groups of people but specific individuals I knew I could turn to. There were times when you were that one person. I felt like “OK, I know that Ricardo supports what I am doing.” And that really made a difference in ways that probably you do not realize, but I am telling you now. Sometimes just that one person can get you through.

Thank you for saying that. You did send me a beautiful card. I’m glad I could be there for you.

Let me ask you one more question. Based on stuff we’ve done in the past, you know that I like to imagine some object or some image that you can represent your trajectory, or your work as a scholar, as an academic on the University of Washington faculty. What would that image be for you right now?

Well one thing I thought of, something I shared with you before, is this tattoo that I got in the last year, and the tattoo is important to me. It is funny that I got a tattoo, right, because I’m older than most people who are getting their first tattoo, and it’s not something I would have predicted that I would do at this point in my life. But there were several reasons I chose to do it.

A big part of where I come from is thanks to my mom, who is from Colombia. She died relatively recently, in the last three years. She gave me this charm bracelet when she started to get sick with the illness that eventually took her life. It was given to her by her parents when she first left Colombia to pursue her education. It is a bracelet of different typical traditional symbols of Colombia, because she was leaving the country to pursue her education. One of them is a rana tairona (a Tairona Frog). When she gave the bracelet to me, I felt I was very moved by it and I wanted to wear it, but I felt like

“The places that we come from and the families that got us here are what give us the strength to go forward, even if those people are not always deeply enmeshed in this institution that we are in now.”
it did not really match my style. After she died, I thought I really wanted to have her with me every day.

Last year I decided to get a tattoo based on one of the symbols on that bracelet. I like the idea of having it under my skin, so it would always be with me. I think this obviously connects to my personal life because of her, but I think it also connects to my professional life, because some of the challenges that I faced recently have made me think, “Well, why wouldn’t I get a tattoo? So what if I am older than most people?” Instead of trying to inhabit a certain professor role that I thought gave me legitimacy in my career, I’m thinking more about my values and my roots, and embracing and asserting those, especially now. I think that’s important. That is an answer, I hope it makes some sense.
Ricardo Gómez

Associate Professor, Information School

Publication

“Life Histories of Labor and Resilience: 25 years of Casa Latina in Seattle”

This interview was conducted by Andrea Oliva.

Ricardo, tell me about the work that you are being recognized for this year. I want you to describe it in plain language, in a way that I can understand it even though I’m not in your field.

I am being recognized this year for work that I did last year with Casa Latina. They are an organization that works with Latino day laborers and domestic workers in the Seattle region. Last year was a special year for them because it was the twenty-fifth anniversary since its founding. Hilary Stern was its founder twenty-five years ago, along with other individuals, including some from the University of Washington. Casa Latina has had a good twenty-five years of promoting and defending Latino workers’ rights. They’ve also offered education and economic opportunity to Latino day laborers. So, I wanted to collect stories of those twenty-five years from the staff, workers, day laborers, volunteers, and Board Members of Casa Latina. I wanted to document the history of hard work, resistance and resilience.

With a group of my students and other collaborators, and with some funding from the Latino Center for Health and the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies at UW, we conducted a number of interviews to document, honor, and commemorate the history of Casa Latina on its twenty-fifth birthday. It was called Life Histories of Labor and Resilience, and it is available online and on Amazon. That is one of the things I did last year, for which I am being recognized this year.

Wow, that’s really great. So, how is it that you ended up at the University of
Washington? What path brought you here?

A combination things—a bit of serendipity, a bit of taking advantage of opportunities that opened up, and a lot of good luck. I never planned to be here, or even to be in the United States, let alone in an American university. I ended up here because that’s the way the mop flops, the way the cookie crumbles. I was born in Canada because my dad was a student there, but grew up in Colombia. I learned English in Colombia. My first word in English was a very long word I had to learn in first grade, “may-I-please-go-to-the-bathroom.” It was one big long word that you had to say if you wanted to go to the bathroom.

Eventually, I ended up in Canada going to university, then lived in Central America and back in Colombia for a few years. I then went to United States to obtain my PhD in Communication at Cornell University, but at the time I didn’t even know where Cornell was or what was the Ivy League; I just knew of a prof there who had written something I liked during my master’s. After my PhD, I went back to Canada and worked with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) for a number of years, and it was there that I was recruited by a headhunter to come work for Microsoft Community Affairs in Seattle. I don’t really work in technology, but I study the social aspects of information and communication technologies. That’s my kind of work. I worked with Microsoft for a couple of years, but professionally it was not a very good experience. Also, at that time my wife was dying of cancer, so it turned out to be a good thing that Microsoft had really good medical insurance, and she had really good medical attention here in Seattle until she died. Just before she died I got my green card, I could leave Microsoft, and an opportunity came up to join the University of Washington.

Initially I was a research associate, leading a research project here, but very shortly after I joined UW there was a faculty position opening, and I applied, just a few days before my wife died of cancer. That time is all very fuzzy in my memory. Even though it wasn’t in my plans, once I was offered the tenure-track position, I took it, and I loved it. It’s been a fantastic addition to my life to join the faculty at the University of Washington. I’ve done things I would have never thought possible. I’ve been able to explore and expand areas of knowledge and of community engagement, and to work with fantastic students. That has been rewarding and satisfying in ways that I never had imagined. As you see, it was the result of
opportunities, serendipity, chance, and good luck. I think one thing that is really important is to remain open to opportunity. To notice when an opportunity arises, and to go for it. Sometimes we don’t notice an opportunity presenting itself, or sometimes we are too paralyzed or afraid to take it.

What helped you overcome some of the obstacles that you encountered on the way to being a part of faculty at the University of Washington?

A combination of having great people around me, having a sense of community, and having good friends and family as a network of people that I can rely on. Having them for support and to bounce ideas off. People add meaning to life and make me feel that I am part of something bigger than myself.

Then there’s also hard work. Working through things, staying focused, being productive, doing what you need to do, and doing it well and doing it on time.

The third ingredient is one that we don’t control, and that is opportunity and luck. Just being in the right place at the right time. All that helps to overcome obstacles.

Now, if you were to speak to a group of first-generation Latinx high school seniors who were unsure about going to college, what would you tell them?

They need to take it into their own hands to do something to improve themselves and to make a better life for themselves. It won’t be given to them. It won’t happen automatically. They need to take it on themselves and actively construct their future. But they need to do it while remaining open to opportunities and to take them as they arise. To have a sense of direction, but don’t get stuck on that direction because life might throw you curveballs and cause a detour. Life may offer you opportunities that end up being better than what you first planned. So, having a plan but remaining open to changing it. That’s an important and delicate
balance that I would encourage a class of graduating high school students to entertain. If they’re even minimally curious about college, they should consider going.

Many times, we feel like we don’t belong there because “there’s nobody else like me.” But there are a lot of people like us and people willing to support and help us. If they are not visible immediately, you need to seek them out, look them up, and find the help that you need. Yes, it’s going to be difficult and challenging, but there’s lots of resources and help if you know how to look for it.

Among many things, education is one thing that is likely to have the most long-lasting impact in whatever you’re going to be doing in your life. I did not know that myself. I dropped out of college. I look back now and realize I didn’t know the magnitude of the risk I was taking, the doors that would be closed for me. After going back, not only to university to get a PhD, I realize the magnitude of the opportunity that education offers, or the magnitude of the gap if you stay out of it. I realize the transformational power of an educational opportunity. So, I would encourage all those students, even if they’re just mildly curious about higher education, to just try it out. Try a community college, or a university, or graduate school. The more you open yourself to education, the more you expose yourself to opportunities to have a brighter and better future.

That’s great advice, and really encouraging. As a current grad student, I’m going to keep all that in mind. Can you talk about an image, a picture, or a drawing that somehow represents your accomplishments as Latinx at the University of Washington?

I don’t know if this is an image that represents an accomplishment, but it’s an image that I am very fond of. It’s a painting, which is behind me in my office, of Quixote with Sancho Panza. They are on their horse and mule going down a rocky hill, next to a big valley. This is powerful and symbolic for me for several reasons. First, because of the image of Don Quixote. He is somebody who is pursuing, apparently, lost dreams—ultimately is forging a future made out of fragile dreams. Some of them are kind of wacky and unrealistic, but I think we need to have that kind of crazy perseverance to make things happen and move forward in life.

The inspiration of Quixote is of importance, but also salient is that it was
painted by my grandfather, another Ricardo Gómez. Three generations before me, he was an artistic painter that became a famous and well-known painter in Colombia. This is one of the few paintings of his that are imaginary. He was mostly a naturalist painter who painted portraits and landscapes. He and my grandmother raised a family of seven kids, including my dad, all of them professionals, all went to college, paid with his painting. He had perseverance to become a professional painter in Colombia, something that was considered crazy at the beginning of the twentieth century. His dad said, “You should be a merchant, you should be a priest, you should be in the military,” but what he wanted to do was paint, and that is what he did all his life, until he died. That is also represented in this painting that I have with me. Perseverance to pursue your dreams, even if they are quixotic, wacky and a bit unrealistic.
What is it that you do? And in particular, what are you being recognized for this year in the Latinx Recognition?

I’m a physician, a neuropathologist. Neuropathology is a subspecialty within pathology, which generally speaking is the study and diagnosis of disease in tissue (anatomic pathology) and body fluids (clinical pathology). For example, if someone was to get a urinalysis or a blood draw to check their cholesterol, among other things, those are tests that are run on a clinical pathology laboratory. Conversely, almost every tissue that is removed from a patient during surgery or a biopsy procedure is sent by the surgeon to the anatomic pathology laboratory in order to be examined. Usually it is first examined grossly and then the tissue goes through a process that ends with portions of that tissue on glass slides that are examined under a microscope by a pathologist. For example, for tumors, based on that examination, pathologists provide a diagnosis, grade, and stage that aids surgeons and oncologists in deciding the patient’s prognosis and if there is a need for chemotherapy and/or radiation. Neuropathology is a subspecialty within anatomic pathology. Neuropathology deals with the diagnosis of disease of the brain, spinal cord, and nerves but also deals with neuromuscular disease, such as muscular dystrophies, as well as disorders of the eye.

Another thing that I didn’t really mention, before I was nominated for this award, I did not know that this organization actually existed at UW. As the years have passed, that is one of the things that I have been looking for. For example, I am eternally grateful to the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine, because through government scholarships and loans, they provided me with the tools to pursue the opportunities that I have today.
As of more recently, when I go back, I am trying to schedule sessions to teach pathology residents back home. When you talk about fulfillment, part of the fulfillment has to do with being part of your community and giving back to that community. Personally, that’s something that I’ve been looking for. I’m happy that I now know about the UW Latino Center for Health and I can become more engaged with my community here at UW and in the city in general.

That’s excellent. I’m looking forward to having you be more active with the diverse community of Latinos and Latinas at the University of Washington. It has been a similar process for myself and I really enjoyed it. Last time, when I did the other book after the first recognition event, going around and meeting people, talking about what they do, what motivates them, and what their notion of success is, was a great experience. I feel really blessed and privileged to be able to get to meet you and to talk with you.

Getting back to your work, is there a particular piece of work that you’re being recognized for?

Yes. Despite being mainly a clinical neuropathologist, we are, after all, in an academic institution. As such I do have other academic interests, and within those is scientific research. My research efforts are mainly in the field of neurotoxicology. I am most interested in the neuropathologic effects of heavy metal exposure, in particular manganese and gadolinium. To give you some background, in some instances manganese exposure in the workplace, like what happens in welders, or the environment, either via very high and acute doses or low doses over an extended period of time, can result in a movement disorder similar to Parkinson’s disease. Our cohort is part of the world’s largest occupational exposure autopsy program with our subjects based out of mining regions a few hours north of Cape Town in the Republic of South Africa. I am the UW site principal investigator of our grant, which is a part of a multi-center collaboration between UW, Washington University in St. Louis, the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and the National Institute for Occupational Health of the Republic of South Africa. As the site’s principal investigator, I oversee the pathologic aspects and the metal quantification component of this R01 grant as well as that of an additional NIH supplement to the parent grant. In essence, we are examining the brains of South African mine workers and controls to characterize the early pathologic changes associated with prolonged manganese exposure. With some
neurodegenerative disorders, by the time the patient develops symptomatology, up to sixty to eighty percent of the neurons in that affected brain region may have died. This in turn does not allow us to look in detail at the underlying neurodegenerative mechanism or identify early diagnosis biomarkers. As such, by the time patients show symptoms, it is too late to start any therapies or remove the person from the exposure. Some of these changes actually occur at exposures that are lower than those recommended by regulatory agencies, meaning that our work can help by describing these early neurodegenerative mechanisms and potentially at some point allowing us the opportunity to inform exposure policy for manganese.

That’s really interesting and important work, with practical and policy implications. Let me ask you one thing, stepping back from your current work, what brought you here? How does a Latino guy like you end up in the University of Washington Medical School faculty?

My father, Francisco, who is Spanish, and my mother, Carmen, who is Puerto Rican, met and married in Spain, where I was born. Later when they separated, my mother and I moved to Puerto Rico, when I was less than a year old. I lived in Puerto Rico until I graduated medical school at age twenty-five. On one hand, it was a very difficult decision to leave because I was leaving behind my home, my entire social infrastructure, language and culture, family and friends, but on the other hand, I felt energized and was excited for the challenges ahead. So, I packed all my life in a few suitcases and mailed the rest in some boxes and started my life as a pathology resident in Baltimore, Maryland. While in Maryland, my goal then became to be admitted to a top neuropathology fellowship program. I’ll be honest with you, while the University of Washington is a world-class institution and has a very big name, coming from Puerto Rico and then being on the East Coast, I wasn’t fully aware of all the incredible opportunities I would have here until I was deep in researching all the fellowship programs.

I visited Seattle twice and fell in love with both the university and the city. So, following residency in Baltimore, I came to Seattle and joined the UW’s two-year neuropathology fellowship program, of which I now serve as an associate director. My wife and I were only supposed to be in Seattle for two years and then we were going back to the East Coast to be closer to our families. During my fellowship’s research year, I was fortunate to be
asked to participate in this manganese research project that was being conducted in my former mentor’s lab, Dr. Jing Zhang collaborating with Dr. Brad Racette from Washington University in St. Louis.

This project started as a training grant to cover part of my salary as a research fellow, then partly as an NIH research supplement to promote diversity in health-related research, and currently as the NIH grant we talked about earlier. I have been so fortunate to be part of this great academic environment with wonderful mentors like my director, Dirk Keene, and to also have a very supportive chair of my department in Charlie Alpers, both who have helped me tremendously and fostered my career. Choosing to come to the University of Washington has been one of the best professional decisions I have made in my life. It’s also funny because as a child, I was a big fan of both the Baltimore Orioles because of Roberto Alomar, and of the Seattle Mariners, because of Edgar Martinez, and those ended up being the two cities I have lived in in the US.

When I hear you describe your path it sounds as if everything was easy and well laid out, ready for you. But I’m sure there were roadblocks and obstacles, problems and difficulties on the way. Rather than focusing on the difficulties and challenges, I’d like to ask you: How do you deal with difficulties and challenges and roadblocks? Where do you draw from? What helps you overcome obstacles that you have found in the way to becoming who you are now?

I agree. It wasn’t easy, particularly that first year living in the United States getting accustomed to speaking a new language and navigating a new culture alone was challenging. I do have to credit my mother, who when I was young had the foresight of supplementing my English outside of elementary school. That definitely came in handy. For me, a lot of obstacles that I faced definitely were mainly in middle and high school before I ended up attending college; being on my own really empowered me to take the reins of my future.

In terms of dealing with obstacles, more so in the past, my way of dealing with them has not been a very evolved one. I think that at the moment when I’m faced with an obstacle, I become a bit numb to my surroundings; it’s like I don’t understand or don’t really focus on it as an obstacle. Maybe it’s because early on, I didn’t necessarily focus on a plan B, perhaps foolishly, and therefore I did not have the luxury to really dwell in the face of obstacles. It’s usually later in retrospect and introspection is when
I really internalize these experiences. Other times, it is by discussing these experiences with others that share similar ones that I recognize past obstacles or that I realize my experience was not necessarily representative of most. Also, in these discussions, one learns from people that had certain situations tougher than you and that allows you some perspective, which is also a great exercise.

More recently, and most importantly, the influence my wife, Krista, has had on my life has been deep and multifaceted. Krista has been an incredible source of grounding and motivation for me to overcome obstacles and reach personal and professional goals. Our family unit is the structure that has provided both of us the opportunity to grow and learn from each other in this journey and face and overcome obstacles together. She definitely has made me a much better all-around human being. It’s funny because when you’re a kid or a young adult and you think about your professional goals and the future, the influence of having someone, the right person, by your side is something that may escape us, but is an incredibly important part of the equation. My father has also been able to give me some great professional advice at important moments in my professional career. As you can imagine my parents, brothers, and my in-laws, Wayne and Pat, are all complementary to this family structure.

That’s a good picture. If I asked you to look back and think of the kids graduating at your high school, let’s imagine they invited you to be their graduation speaker and you have to give a five minute speech at their high school graduation. It has to be short and inspirational, brief and motivational. What would you tell them? What would you tell high school graduates in Puerto Rico today?

You know, I had an interesting time during middle and high school. Different from college and medical school, I definitely didn’t have the best grades, although I did well on my college entrance exams. I am not sure how much of it was a function of me versus that of my environment. I guess I’ve never thought about being invited to speak at my high school graduation. I would imagine that there is a very low likelihood that would ever happen [laughs]. But to get to your question and going back to the previous question about obstacles, I would start by telling them that something that I now retrospectively realize is that during important times in life there will be certain people or obstacles in your way that may try to discourage you by saying “You won’t make it” or “You are
not good enough” or perhaps try to suggest that there is even a problem with you as a person; that last one was always particularly bothersome to me. In retrospect, at many points it would have been very easy to get discouraged by people discounting you or not believing in you.

In my case, there are two instances that were not necessarily the worst of all, but for whatever reason have stuck with me. One was of a high school guidance counselor that when I was applying for college told me that I shouldn’t go to college and that I should look at other “alternatives”. The funny thing is that I do not recall this person really ever talking to me in depth or anything like that in order to gain any significant insight to base their assessment on. The other one was when I was about to become a college freshman and was looking for a place to live in a new city with two of my high school classmates. We were meeting with the landlord and one of the moms made us change the rent contract in a way that would make us all pay more every month but would guarantee that the roommates wouldn’t have to cover the residual share if one of the boys (looking at me) dropped out of college. Ironically, throughout the years, many of these experiences actually became a tremendous source of motivation, and I would recommend that rather than dwelling on these, the students use such instances as a way to fuel their dreams. For example, if I would have followed my guidance counselor’s advice, I probably wouldn’t be talking to you today.

The most important thing I would tell these students is that it is very important to know where you want your destination to be and convince yourself that not making it is not an option. You have to take a second and really think about and believe what you are and what you hear within yourself, and pay less attention to people that you know, quite frankly, may not even be equipped or prepared to give you any advice about who you are or your goals. I would tell them not to concentrate on the parts of the system that are going to assign labels like “You’re not going

“It is very important to know where you want your destination to be and convince yourself that not making it is not an option. You have to take a second and really think about and believe what you are and what you hear within yourself, and pay less attention to people that you know, quite frankly, may not even be equipped or prepared to give you any advice about who you are or your goals.”
to make it here” or “You are better to make it over there,” but to actually focus on the part of the system that is going to allow you to compete and let you work hard for what you want, as ultimately you are in charge of your own destiny. In high school, I concentrated on those teachers who would give everyone an equal chance to prove what you are made of in order to succeed. Someone I remember very fondly was my tenth-grade biology teacher, who was the first person ever to teach me to look at actual human tissues under a light microscope. She always gave me a chance to prove myself and was one of the few people during that time that motivated me to work hard where other teachers—that thought they had me figured out—failed.

In summary, I would tell them that while I think that it is to a certain extent healthy to listen to other people’s thoughts and advice, one should not let that define where we are going or who we see ourselves becoming. Who people believe you are or were, whether it is in high school or at any other point of your life, doesn’t necessarily define you as an individual or the opportunities that you deserve or are going to have.

That’s very powerful. Thank you. In the work I do, when doing interviews I like to ask people to take pictures of something in their environment, or to think of an object or a symbol or an image that represents their work or their trajectory, or things that they really value in life. In your case, what would that object or image be? What is an image or something that you think is very representative, very symbolic for you?

I agree, from reviewing your prior work, this is a very powerful tool. I think this goes back to what we were talking about a bit earlier and also what each individual defines as a true measure of success or accomplishment. For me, of paramount importance is more about the structure on which I am able to build and share accomplishments. At the center of my structure is my wife, Krista, who has been my rock from when I met her as a resident and everyday thereafter for the last fourteen years. For me, success then is to be able to provide support and feed into this structure and to have a happy family life outside of work. Therefore, my picture is one of my family being able to enjoy each other and the things we enjoy doing out in nature. The picture encompasses what’s important to me. The work that we all do in academia is incredibly important and I’m not trying to minimize that, but when I think about overall success to me, that is to be able to provide and care for my family, because my life wouldn’t be what it is without it.
Show me one of these pictures. Do you have one?

Yes, I would have to pull it up on my phone. You know, now with COVID-19, Zoom is the new way to do business, right?

It’s really interesting because otherwise I would have gone over to your office and we would have talked there, and maybe I would have taken a picture of you showing me your phone. But now you can show it to me here on Zoom and I can take a screenshot of it or you can send me a picture and I can use it.

This is one of the pictures that I took in Northern Washington.

I see you by the water.

Those are the moments that are most important to me and feed back into working hard to achieve my professional goals and dreams. Our time as a family with our dog Sam is what refills and recharges me to go into the daily grind. The luxury of having met the perfect person and having them be a part of my everyday life is what’s most important to me, and I am quite lucky.
Thank you for joining me this morning. To get started, why don’t you tell me a bit about why you’re being honored this year? What is the motive for your recognition in the Latinx Recognition this year?

Actually, I’m not sure I know the answer to that.

What would be your best guess? What is some piece of work that you’ve done that makes you very proud?

Well, I’ve been here at the University of Washington for twenty-one years now, and this is my last year here. I took a job at the Oregon Health and Science University, where I’ll start on July 1. I will be the division head of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine for their university.

That’s excellent. Our loss, but that’s great. Fantastic for you!

Thank you! I think I’ll be their first Latina in the division--I certainly proud of that. Oh, but what am I proud of in my work at UW? I can tell you a little bit about what I do. I’m a professor of medicine. I am a clinical researcher of critical illness, with a focus on the acute respiratory distress syndrome, or ARDS. ARDS is something that a lot of people didn’t know about until COVID: when people die with COVID, for the most part they’re dying from the disease that I’ve studied for the last twenty years. And so it’s been it’s certainly an interesting time to see the entire population talking about respiratory failure and ventilators and critical care when that’s where I’ve spent my entire professional life.

I lead two kinds of studies: interventional studies where we look at
treatments to try to improve outcomes for people who are critically ill, and observational studies where we try and understand diseases and outcomes better. The treatments we study may be in the ICU to try to help people survive the acute illness, or might be after the ICU to try to improve all of the kinds of problems that people have after surviving critical illness. We know people have trouble getting back to work, they have weakness and fatigue, they often have depression or anxiety or post-traumatic stress, they have trouble thinking, and we really actually don’t have treatments or ways to improve any of those things right now. That’s really where I focus my career—understanding what are the predictors of these different kinds of outcomes after critical illness and figuring out how to make them better. Again, it feels like the whole world’s talking about it now. People are worried a lot about recovery after COVID, and that fits perfectly into this.

While doing these studies and leading these trials, I think probably the aspect that I’m proudest of is all the people that I’ve mentored over the last twenty years. My mentees are now spread across the country, where they are leading research and patient care efforts in the care of critically ill patients. It’s exciting and humbling to feel that I’ve had an impact on the careers of many people.

I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area; that’s where I attended college and medical school— at Berkeley and UCSF. I went to Philadelphia for my residency training in Internal Medicine. It was during residency when I became fascinated and inspired to understand about survivorship after critical illness. At the time, there was really only one person in the world who had a research program on survivorship, and he was here at University of Washington. So I came here in 1999 to learn how to do this kind of research with Len Hudson, who was the head of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine here at the time. My original plan was to get a degree in epidemiology, which I did, and to learn the

“I was looking at your profile and thinking, ‘Wow, you’re really in the thick of it.’ I bet you didn’t expect to be in this situation. Now that you’re planning your exit, our loss, what brought you here? How did you end up as a Latina woman at the University of Washington?”
skill set and then to go back to Philadelphia and develop a program there at Penn with the folks who sort of helped me first fall in love with this area. But I guess things don’t usually happen exactly as planned. Right when I was thinking I would go back to Philly, I met my husband, who had no interest in living in Philadelphia. He was living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the time, spending his free time rock climbing and enjoying the local art and food scenes. It was easier to tempt him to come to Seattle and stay here then to go back to Philadelphia. Over time, Seattle became a very hard place to leave. My research career was going really well, and my parents ended up moving up from San Francisco to Seattle to support my husband and I as we raised our kids. The years really flew by.

So in that path, that road for Latina in academia, in the world of medicine and medical research, there’s all sorts of obstacles and roadblocks. Rather than focusing on the roadblocks and obstacles, what helped you overcome them? What do you reach out for? What gives you strength to move forward in the face of obstacles as a Latina in academia?

Well, I think one source of support and inspiration that’s always been there for me is my mom. She is an incredible woman. She was born in Bogotá, Colombia, and was an amazing student. She wanted to study mathematics and engineering, but her school, the Universidad de los Andes, did not have the advanced classes she needed. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to come to the United States, where she went to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. She was the only woman in her engineering class, which is where she met my dad. There was quite a bit of competition for her since she was the only woman in the entire program! She stayed in the United States and married my dad; the first member of her family of ten to leave Colombia. Anytime that things feel difficult for me, I think about my mom. I can’t imagine how incredibly much more difficult and trailblazing what she did was compared to what I’ve done. So she’s always been both my philosophical and literal sense of support. She and my dad moved to Seattle to help take care of my kids so that I could continue to be a critical care physician and a researcher and travel and speak around the world and do all these things while still always feeling that my family was taken care of here. She’s my number one.

I think I’ve heard so many mentions of moms that I should dedicate this book to moms all over, because they have come up so frequently in these conversations.
Moms are the best! There have been others who have supported and inspired me as well. My husband, of course. And other women in Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, although there were very few on the faculty at UW when I first came here, and no Latinas at all. But early on, I found myself looking outside of the university and have found some really powerful, amazing women mentors. There’s one woman—her name is Margaret Herridge—who’s a professor at the University of Toronto. She was invited to the UW as a visiting professor when I was a fellow. We had breakfast together and she shared about her life—including raising three young kids—it was amazing to learn about things that she was juggling. She was the first person to tell me that we can have lofty aspirations, but we have to remember that it’s our own life and we set our own rules. As long as we are transparent and communicate what these rules are, we can set our own paths. We don’t have to just follow somebody else’s approach. Hearing this at that point in my career really meant a lot to me—especially in the early years of trying to succeed in this career while having three little kids at home. I often heard Margaret’s voice in my head when I decided to limit work-related travel to four trips a year until my youngest was in school. Anytime I got any pushback that I should be traveling more, especially around Europe, in order to be promoted, I just thought about Margaret and knew that I could do it my way.

That’s beautiful. So if you were to think of the next generation of potential scholars, all the high school students who are now graduating and not having a graduation ceremony, if you were invited to speak to them, maybe virtually, what would you tell them? What would be your motivational, inspirational message to them at this point?

Wash your hands [laughs]. That’s a wonderful question. I think it starts with being able to listen to yourself, to recognize what your individual voice and strengths and talents are and finding a way to use that to drive your path forward and to try not to be pushed back, pushed down by people who either don’t hear your voice or who are telling a truth that doesn’t sound like truth. I think that’s one. I think the

“I think it starts with being able to listen to yourself, to recognize what your individual voice and strengths and talents are and finding a way to use that to drive your path forward and to try not to be pushed back, pushed down by people who either don’t hear your voice or who are telling a truth that doesn’t sound like truth.”
other, really for me, is to work together. Probably my favorite thing about
the work that I do is that it’s never just me. When I’m working clinically,
I work on an ICU team with amazing nurses, with respiratory therapists,
with physiotherapists and pharmacists, and then ten other doctors are
there with me, taking care of these patients. It’s not this ego thing of one
person making decisions. It’s all of us really working as a team, and my
research is exactly the same way.

My research teams are amazing intellectual collaborations of people
putting out their thoughts and listening, respecting each other and
making each other’s work better, and then figuring out how to actually
carry projects out. The team approach makes everything better in my
work, especially writing grants, which can be very lonely. When pay lines
are at the tenth percentile and nothing is getting funded, it can be incred-
ibly demoralizing. So instead of doing this along, I’ve joined together with
a group of friends across the country. We write all our grants together.
This way, when you don’t get funded, it’s not a personal attack. It’s just an
obstacle, and then you call your friends and we all bad-mouth the review-
ers (not really), and then we plan how to move forward. Also, if you’re
writing grants with a group of five people, then probably at least one of
the grants is going to hit, and so it makes it so much easier to always stay
funded. One of my favorite quotations that’s engraved in the floor here
at Harborview is ‘sorrow shared is halved and joy shared is doubled.’ I
feel that that team approach really makes that true.

That’s beautiful. So let me ask you one last question. In the type of work that
I do, I like asking people for a concrete object, an image, a symbol, something,
and I know you received an invitation to think of that. What came to your
mind? Do you have an object in mind? Something that symbolizes your work,
your trajectory in academia, an image that is
dear to you, that is important to you that you
can share with me.

What comes to mind is the frog.

Tell me about the frog.

In Colombian culture, frogs are very import-
ant. If you look at Pre-Columbian art, espe-
cially in gold, the frog is one of the most

Tairona Gold Frog.
common symbols. I think frogs are amazing for many reasons. They are such a great symbol of transformation, change, and adaptation. I think that that’s an important one. I think that they say something about the strength of being small. There’s no such thing as a huge frog, yet they find a way to prosper in their environment. They’re more dangerous than they seem. Frogs can blend in, or they can stand out. They are beautiful, strong, and hold secrets. Frogs are cool.
Tell me about the work you are being recognized for this year. Can you describe it in plain language, in a way that my grandmother would understand?

I have been appointed as the chair of the Department of Biostatistics (as of September 16, 2019). The department has outstanding members (faculty, students, and staff), a widely recognized top graduate program and has strong relationships with a number of local institutions. So, the opportunity is both humbling and exciting for me—also as the first (Latinx) woman to chair the department!

How did you end up at UW? What is the path that brought you here?

I was born and raised in Brazil, and I am a third-generation Japanese descendant. I obtained my bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of São Paulo. My advisor in Brazil highly encouraged me to come to the US for my doctoral degree. At that time, my knowledge of English was very limited. So, I joined a language school with some intensive programs to learn as much as I could to prepare me for the TOEFL exam and ultimately to join a doctoral program. At the same time, I was applying for graduate schools and for Brazilian scholarships. I joined Duke University in 1996 on a graduate fellowship from the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). I earned my PhD in Statistics and Decision Sciences in 1999. Following that, I worked as a post-doctoral research associate for the MD Anderson Cancer Research Center at the University of Texas before joining the University of Washington in 2002. Besides chair of the Department of Biostatistics, I am now an adjunct professor in the School of Pharmacy and an affiliate investigator at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.
What helped you overcome some of the obstacles you found on your way to being on the faculty at UW?

My mom was always a major anchor in my family. She was determined and worked hard throughout her life. While she passed away during my first year in college, her life lessons live deep within me—and they give me perspective and strength to keep moving forward, embracing new opportunities, and challenging myself to overcome fears and self-doubts.

If you were to speak to a group of first-generation Latinx high school seniors who were unsure about going to college or to UW, what would you tell them?

My grandparents shared the experience of so many immigrants who left their countries in search of opportunities, to escape the consequences of war and poverty. My parents went to school to learn the language (Portuguese) and help my grandparents. Both of my parents had very limited access to education, but they believed in it—and they worked hard, making sacrifices so that my brothers and I could go to college. My family story is not unique and resonates with so many others on the impact of immigration, inequity/inequality, etc. I think their lesson is what I would pass to the next generation: Education empowers you in whatever path you choose—embrace that opportunity with higher education!

Can you share with me an image (picture, drawing, object) that somehow represents your accomplishment as Latinx at UW? Tell me more about this image.

I am sending a photo with my grandmother and my mother. I spoke already of some of the challenges they faced. But there is more to that story. My grandmother became the single parent of three children when my grandfather passed away. My mom helped the family by working as a seamstress. While my mom never got to study beyond elementary school, it was through her hard work that she made sure that both of my uncles
“My grandmother became the single parent of three children when my grandfather passed away. My mom helped the family by working as a seamstress. While my mom never got to study beyond elementary school, it was through her hard work that she made sure that both of my uncles could go to college.”

could go to college. My mom placed that same determination into making sure that her own kids could go to college someday. I still remember her long working days—which very often included weekends and holidays. Unfortunately, my mom passed away before she could see any of her children graduate. But we were all inspired by her will power, strength and caring love. I owe to her life examples all that I have achieved!
Dr. María Elena García &
Dr. José Antonio Lucero

GARCÍA:
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF IDEAS

PUBLICATION
» “Death of a Guinea Pig: Grief and the Limits of Multispecies Ethnography in Peru,” Environmental Humanities

LUCERO:
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF IDEAS; & ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, JACKSON SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

PUBLICATION
» “The Fight for Human Rights Begins at Home”

Tony and María Elena, let’s have this experiment of having an interview with both of you together to talk about your work as Latinx faculty at UW. First, to get to know you, can you each tell us what is it you are being recognized for, what is it you do, and what are you bringing to the Latinx community at UW?

Tony: OK, so I’ll start. The piece that I think I am being recognized for this year is actually something that you know about, Ricardo. It involves one of our colleagues, Angelina Godoy. And it involves the Latin American and Caribbean studies program that I chair. Angelina shared with us the
outriggerous situation she’s been going through, where ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] has sued her and the UW Center for Human Rights for their efforts to get information on juvenile detention facilities in Cowlitz County. This forced her to find legal counsel to defend herself from these legal demands. So, when we heard about this struggle we wanted to be supportive. We wanted to figure out something to do. After the meeting one of our friends and colleagues, Ileana Rodriguez Silva said we should think about writing something. I really liked that idea, and it happened that there was a special issue of NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America: Report on the Americas) that had an opportunity for us to do something on this story. So Ileana, myself, and another colleague who is a former PhD student of ours, Yolanda Valencia, collaborated on this piece that explored the history of the case of ICE vs. UW Center for Human Rights. One of the things that really struck us was the language that the government was using; they were using a language of care. They argued that they needed to protect these documents in order to protect these young people’s privacy. Really? With Ileana’s help we kind of traced that language of care back to the “Insular cases,” cases that examined how much of the US Constitution traveled to places like Puerto Rico. Thinking with those cases about Puerto Rico and the way that this language of care has been mobilized as a strategy against racialized people in the Americas is really what that article is about. But the really lovely thing about that is it was an opportunity to collaborate and be supportive of a colleague, through collaboration with other colleagues. So it was a really nice moment for us to come together as a community and visibilize one of the struggles we’re going through as a university and as a larger community.

María Elena: I also think that collaborating not just among faculty, but with a former grad student, also Latinx, is remarkable. Yolanda just recently got her PhD in geography and is now a faculty member at the University of Maryland. It was just a really nice way to come together.

Tony: Yes, that was great. Yolanda is now an assistant professor of geography and urban planning at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and she is doing great. I also had the opportunity to interview her through the Relational Poverty Network, in order to highlight some of the terrific research that she’s doing with Latinx communities in Eastern Washington, and how they’re finding strategies of resilience. Having the opportunity to work with others, similar to what you’re doing with the interviews
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In this project, is just a nice opportunity to make us feel a little less alone.

Ileana also spoke about that collaboration in my interview with her, so we have her perspective on it as well.

María Elena: That’s great. For me, I’m not sure, but I think I’m being recognized for an essay that I wrote that got published in a journal called Environmental Humanities. It was a really difficult essay for me to write. I’m an anthropologist, Peruvian born, of Quechua descent, and I do a lot of work on Indigenous rights issues. I’ve been increasingly thinking about human animal relations, coming at it from the perspective of Indigenous ways of thought and being—not centered on human life but on all life, including animals, glaciers, rivers, and all things being alive. My work comes from that place. I wrote this essay as an exploration of one moment that happened when I was doing fieldwork, right before my son was born (we now have a seven-year-old son, but at that time I was seven months pregnant). I was feeling this pressure that I had to do as much work as I could. As a woman in the academy, there is a lot of pressure about being productive, even through maternity. So I went to do fieldwork toward the end of my pregnancy, research which turned out to be useful for my forthcoming book on food politics in Peru. The book is a critical look at the celebratory narrative of the power of food in Peru. I look at the dark side of this narrative, looking at what it obscures. I’m focusing in particular on the violence of these stories about food, and the perpetuation of violence against Indigenous peoples, Indigenous lands, and indigenous animals like the guinea pig.

In Peru, guinea pigs are food animals. As part of fieldwork I went to a guinea pig breeding farm. I hadn’t thought about the connection between being pregnant and going to see these pregnant guinea pigs being forced to give birth continuously. At the farm, I had an experience with one pregnant guinea pig. She was not looking so good, so I asked my guide, who was also the owner of the farm, about the pregnant guinea pig, and he came over and looked at her and said, “Oh yeah, she’s not going to last. So he picked her up, he tossed her to the side, and left her to die. That moment led me to explore the politics of food in a new way, and that is what I discuss in the essay that I just published. I talk about the politics of research, and the ethics of the kind of research I was conducting. What does it mean to conduct research beyond the human? What are the ethical dimensions of my position as a pregnant woman? What are
my connections with what I’m studying? I use this as a way of exploring different issues, including the challenge of thinking about nonhuman animals in a context where there’s so much poverty or so much violence against humans. So how do you even begin to think about nonhuman life in that context? I use that as a starting point to think through some of these broader topics. I think that is the article I am being recognized for.

*It must be really interesting for you to go back to Peru, where you come from, and to bring this critical eye of a researcher, to do this kind of exploration in the place you come from.*

**María Elena:** Oh absolutely, yes. This is one of the things that I also write about in my book. I’m a researcher but I’m also a Peruvian woman. I’m also a family member, so I’m talking about these questions, and I’m thinking critically about the guinea pig for example. My family, my uncles, my parents think I’m crazy. At that time I was staying in my grandmother’s apartment. My grandmother passed away a few years ago, but at the time of this encounter she was alive. I remember coming back from that fieldwork experience and being shocked. It took me years to write about it because it was so hard. My mother was visiting and I was trying to talk to her and to my grandmother about this experience. It was very difficult because they just could not, my mom especially, could not understand how this was even a question, why would I even care about these issues. My grandmother was very supportive of me; we’ll come back to that later.

*Yes, we will come back to your grandmother later. For now, why don’t you tell us a bit of how one gets from growing up in Peru to being on the faculty of the UW? What is the path that brings you here?*

**María Elena:** There’s no real path [laughs]. I was born in Peru. I left when I was five years old. We moved for political reasons, and we were in lots of different parts of Latin America: Venezuela, Puerto Rico, we were in Mexico City for a long time. In fact we were in Mexico City for six years, so for me that was the longest I had been anywhere. For me, Mexico was home. Then very abruptly my father came home and said, “We’re moving to the United States,” so in the span of two weeks we went from living in Mexico, where I had my friends—I was fourteen at the time—and suddenly we’re in Virginia. This is Virginia in 1985, so before the influx of Latin American migrants, where now there are robust communities of Peruvians, Bolivians, Salvadoreans, but back then, not at all.
That was 1985, and at that time there was also a war going on in Peru. There was ongoing violence due to struggles between guerrilla movements and the government, especially in the Andes and Amazon regions, and violence was also intensifying in Lima. While we were away, we would always go back every summer to visit family, my grandmother in particular. That year (1985) we moved to Virginia, and my parents said we would no longer return to Peru until the violence ends. It was a really important year. I think of it as the year where there was this radical shift, a disruption in my life. I talk about it now because I think it’s probably what shaped who I am today and what I do. It was the first time I was confronted by people asking me, “What are you? Who are you? Where do you come from? Are you Latina? A woman of color?” All these terms that I never really encountered before. So suddenly I had to think about who I was and where I was from. Before that, I knew I was Peruvian, but you know, my friends, home, everything was in Mexico. But suddenly I needed an anchor, and I started to think more about Peru.

I also think the fact that we wanted to go back home but couldn’t meant I started asking questions about why. That was around the time that I learned that my grandfather was a Quechua Indigenous man; I had not known that before. There was this whole other history in my family I didn’t know about. So I think of that moment, and how I was faced with things such as questions from other kids saying, “Did you live in grass huts or did you go to school on a donkey?” You know, these kinds of things.

Yes, I remember being asked those types of questions too.

María Elena: Exactly, I think a lot of us experience this. It was an important moment for me because I began to think about these big questions, and to think about racism, otherness, and identity. It forced me to think more about who I was, what I wanted to do, and how I wanted to live my life. It led me to anthropology, because I realized this is a place where I can actually ask these questions about identity, and I learned down the line that it was a discipline that included fieldwork. I remember thinking about this as something that would allow me to go back home. So it’s interesting the way in which we position ourselves. We weren’t citizens at the time, so I wanted to go back to Peru and I had no intention of ever coming back to the US.

And then we get back to the story of your grandmother.
Maria Elena: Yes, I was doing my dissertation work. I was at Brown University studying for my PhD in anthropology. I went to Cusco, Peru, to do dissertation work. I lived there for three years. I was happy and I didn’t want to come back. I had a life, and I was about to quit the PhD program. I remember I went to Lima to tell my grandmother that I had made this decision. I thought she was going to be very happy that I was going to stay in the country. I’ll never forget what she said to me. She listened to everything I had to say, and then said, “Who do you think you are? This isn’t about you. This PhD is not about you; it’s about you and your family, and what this symbolizes.” I was the first woman in my family to get a PhD. She said, “You go back, you finish, you get that PhD, and then once you do that you can come back, you can do whatever you want. But you have to go back and finish.” And so I did. I listened. Of course I listened to my grandma. I did. And of course, life happens. In fact it was during my last year at Brown that I met Tony, and you know, you just move through, and you get tracked (professionally) in different ways.

I remember you had told me the story of that conversation with your grandmother before. Thank you for sharing it with me here.

Maria Elena: Yes, that was part of the pathway that led me to this position.

Thank you, Maria Elena. How about you, Tony? How does a guy from the border end up here?

Tony: That’s a good question. I actually have been thinking about this a bit this week. Maybe it’s serendipitous. I’ve been really focusing on this one moment in fifth grade. I grew up in El Paso, Texas. We also lived in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, until I was about five or six. The border lines are really interesting for many reasons that only became clear to me after I left. I remember this day in fifth grade, when I had one of the best teachers I’d ever had up to that point. It was a public school in Texas. As you can imagine, Texas history is a very big deal, and the way it’s taught is very strange. I remember this one teacher that I had—I really liked him; he was a really good teacher. He was funny; he had a way of really engaging us. He was the first teacher to ever give me a real book, a real academic book. I remember him fondly in many ways, but I remember the troubling ways he would talk about Texas history. For example, he would tell us about the Battle of San Jacinto, where the Texas forces defeated the army of Santa Ana, and he would reveal Mexicans captured:
The whole story was about how white settlers defeated all these Mexicans. And this was to a classroom where we were all Mexican! We were all Lucero, Maldonado, Guerrero, Reyes, yet we were cheering for the Texans. And it took me years to understand how horrible that narration was, and the violence not only against the Mexicans but also the violence against Native people. We didn’t talk about the Indigenous people whose lands we were on. That really struck me in retrospective. As I left El Paso, I went to college at Stanford, then I was able to get a PhD at Princeton. Indigenous politics became the way of thinking about not only my own interest in social movements and democracy, but also thinking about how colonial my education and upbringing have been. That continues to be a preoccupation that I have, about how we can really unpack the many things that have shaped us individuals and how we have to unlearn. How the task of unlearning is so central to what we do in the university. And that’s the short version of it.

Now if you look back to the years between the time you were learning about Texas history in school, and the path that led to your PhD and into the faculty at UW, where did you get help? Because it’s not an easy road. It’s a hard, difficult road. But rather than focusing on what the obstacles were, I’d like to ask you about things that helped you. When you find obstacles and bumps on the road, what do you do?

Tony: It’s a good question and it’s one that probably has many answers. What I always tell my students is that what’s most important is that you don’t do this by yourself. You always need to find your people, whatever that means to you. You need to find some kind of community, and the people will kind of help you figure out the big problems. That has certainly helped me. I can identify people in every stage of my life who have shown me the way, intellectually, introducing me to key concepts or thinkers. I have a friend, a former professor from college, who introduced me to some of the thinkers I think are still central to me, Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams. What this professor also did, his name is Ray McDermott; he teaches at Stanford School of Education, was show real kindness. He was also incredibly funny. What he did is he made me feel like I belonged. He also taught me other important things, like this is how the academy works. There are formulas and templates that exist but many of us don’t really know of their existence. So someone reveals
that to you, pulls the curtain back, and it can change everything. Those kinds of moments are almost magical. I can think about people in every stage of my life and who have been there for me, and I’m sure María Elena can as well.

**María Elena:** For sure, the same thing. I think for me, for both of us, neither of us came from a background where we have families who knew anything about the academy. We had to figure out a lot of things on our own. I think a lot of it also comes down to personality. For me, I don’t do well when somebody tells me I can’t do something. I respond by saying, “Let me show you how I can do it.” That’s just me. I’m stubborn. But that doesn’t mean it’s easy; it can be really hard and really hurtful. So for me, it’s been finding ways to overcome the hurt, like the kind of insults that are constant even now. I’m a tenured faculty member, and it’s still there. It’s unbelievable. It’s also important to learn how to not second-guess myself. I still do that, but it’s figuring out how to not let what other people say about you define you, how to push back against that.

“I don’t know—people who recognized something in me, who were just generous, kind, and helped me get to the next stage of whatever it was I was trying to do. But it was also learning not to take myself out. One of the things I still struggle with is this. I remember in college I especially struggled with this: I started with this idea that all those opportunities and things like study abroad, all those scholarships, that wasn’t for me. I thought, how could I possibly compete with other people, even though I was working way more than anybody else. I remember that so clearly that now I tell my students that that’s a mistake that I learned from. Don’t take yourself out, try, because even if you apply for something and you don’t get it, at least you got to practice how to do it, and that helps you.

“One of the things I was thinking in relation to your question is the importance of finding your people, as Tony was saying. And learning how to accept help. This is crucial. I had one professor when I was in college who, if it hadn’t been for her, I wouldn’t be here. She cosigned a loan with me, to that level. There are people in my life who have been like that. I don’t know—people who recognized something in me, who were just generous, kind, and helped me get to the next stage of whatever it was I was trying to do. But it was also learning not to take myself out. One of the things I still struggle with is this. I remember in college I especially struggled with this: I started with this idea that all those opportunities and things like study abroad, all those scholarships, that wasn’t for me. I thought, how could I possibly compete with other people, even though I was working way more than anybody else. I remember that so clearly that now I tell my students that that’s a mistake that I learned from. Don’t take yourself out, try, because even if you apply for something and you don’t get it, at least you got to practice how to do it, and that helps you.

“The institution needs them. They actually have so much to offer as students. It’s not just that they would be going to school and learning, but that they also have so much to give, that they also have knowledge that is needed at the university.”
You need to figure out what it takes to apply. So finding your people, figuring out how to not take yourself out, and actually trying to find ways to reach your goals.

One of the things that’s hardest for me, but I’m also learning and working really hard on this, is asking for help. I’m not good at asking for help. It’s all related. I’m learning how to recognize that, as Tony said, none of us do anything on our own. We are always already connected, but recognizing that sometimes if I can’t do something by myself, it’s not just me being stubborn. I actually need some help in recognizing that we’re always in a network, various networks of support. Also giving that support to others, so we spend a lot of time trying to do what we can to support our students, to reach out to our neighbors. Whatever it is, I think it makes us stronger.

Why do you think asking for help is so difficult?

María Elena: I don’t know. From as far as I can remember, I was always told you can’t ask for help. I always did what I had to do. As a woman in my family especially, it was not a given that I would go to college. If I did go to college, I was going to do that so I can find someone to get married to. There was never an expectation that I would actually go on to be an independent and professional woman. This also may be related to my own personal kind of history. It’s something I still struggle with. I think especially because since I came to this country I have had to prove myself, I have to work harder than everybody else, and I have to be an example. As I became a faculty member, then I had to be an example for others who needed to see faculty members who look like us. There’s always a sense of responsibility that I have to rise above things, and maybe I thought that I could do things on my own.

That’s a great question, I don’t feel like I’m doing a good job answering it. I don’t know why it’s so hard for me but it is. I recognize that it’s still something that I struggle with. I know that a couple of times—I can actually pinpoint them—I have asked for help, and it has made all the difference. It takes a lot of trust. The people I asked for help with are family. I don’t mean biological family, I mean family that we create as we go. At UW, we are actually so fortunate to have such wonderful friends, colleagues like you, and sometimes I feel this network of people is more my family than my own family for different reasons. It’s about trust. It’s about vulnerability, and opening yourself up to that which can be hard when you’ve
had many years of building up this kind of wall.

*What about you Tony? Any insight on why it’s so difficult to ask for help?*

**Tony:** Well, I think a lot of it relates to the fact that so many of us feel like we don’t belong, that we’re impostors. This idea of impostor syndrome is not of course limited to Latinx students or people of color, but it feels more acute, but because we’ve been made to feel that way. So I think asking for help can be a signal that we don’t really belong, or at least that’s how students might feel it. We feel that once we show that we aren’t sure about what’s going on, then the jig is up and we have been revealed for the fraud that we think we are.

I think that happens because often people frame it that way, like this person clearly doesn’t belong here, or they are only here because of their last names, or because of who they are, or their skin color. You want to avoid those kinds of situations. But when you understand that nobody is born knowing anything, everything is learned, and this voyage of intellectual discovery is always a collective one, once you realize that, you can ask questions and you can actually join the conversation. I think what is important is really doing that work to get your confidence up. Your voice matters, and that’s a tricky thing to do. But I think once you get there, that’s really the game changer.

*Let’s move on. How about if I ask you about a high school graduation scenario. You’re invited to give a speech for the high school graduation near here, North of Seattle. Your speech has to be short, inspirational, motivational. What would you say to a group of high school students today? Many of them can be first-generation graduates in high school. Many of them can be Latinx. What is your message to them? I guess it can be a joint speech that you’re giving together, the two of you.*

**Tony:** I think we would tell them that we know a lot about where they’re coming from.

**María Elena:** Yes, we know where they’re coming from, and we didn’t expect to be where we are now. One of the first things we would say is that hey they’re graduating, which is a huge thing in itself, and that they can do whatever they want to do. That nobody has the right to tell them what they can or cannot do, which is a narrative that we see all the time.
That it’s not just them; that we can find others who support our dreams and help us make them a reality. That we can, that it’s possible because I think sometimes one of the biggest obstacles is the feeling that it’s not actually possible to do what you want to do. So I would start with that.

Tony: And we would also tell them that many of us are really trying to make the university better, and for that we need them. That we are waiting for them, and that they are part of a long struggle to change the way the world works. If they can figure out how to overcome their own insecurities and anxieties, they can honestly and literally be part of changing the world.

Maria Elena: And even if they can’t, they should still come because there are lots of people who will help them navigate through all that. I think the point that Tony made about how we need them is absolutely true. The institution needs them. They actually have so much to offer as students. It’s not just that they would be going to school and learning, but that they also have so much to give, that they also have knowledge that is needed at the university. That’s also a way of flipping the script a little bit, which I think is really important. Once they get here, there’s going to be an incredible community welcoming them, ready to support them, and ready to offer the type of support they would need. That all of us need to support each other to move through this difficult terrain.

Tony: I also think that we quite literally need them. When we have students who come from backgrounds that are similar to ours, the connections that we have and the starting point that we share are remarkable. One of the things that María Elena and I do is run a study abroad program to Peru, which unfortunately had to be suspended for obvious reasons relating to the Coronavirus this summer. We hope to do it in 2021. We’ve had a lot of Latinx students participate in that. They go to Peru with us and they think about art, politics, social movements, and the history of political violence. Then they see that the world can be really different.

“Myth of us feel like we don’t belong, that we’re impostors. This idea of impostor syndrome is not of course limited to Latinx students or people of color, but it feels more acute, but because we’ve been made to feel that way. So I think asking for help can be a signal that we don’t really belong, or at least that’s how students might feel it.”
That the connection with faculty can be really different. Those kinds of moments of connections, I think, draw on what we talked about earlier about how we had these moments of connection with certain faculty members who really opened some doors for us and really saved us when we were kind of floundering. If we can do that for our students who come from backgrounds like ours, and of course we try to do it for all our students, but there is also something special about students who come from backgrounds that remind us of what we went through.

**María Elena:** There’s a different kind of familiarity, and also to get them to think in a hemispheric way is really powerful, because they get to see their own experiences whether it’s eastern Washington, Tijuana, Queens, or wherever, but they begin to see these connections in politics and affective connections to what’s happening in Peru, what’s happening in Argentina, what’s happening in Colombia, and beyond, that’s really powerful. At least that’s what we’ve seen.

**Tony:** Absolutely. When I had a conversation with Yolanda, the former student we mentioned who is now a colleague, she said that one of the things she’s trying to resist is the language of periphery and center. Because what she finds more important is that there are many centers and reminding students that the way they live is not the backwater; it’s the center of something. And talking about that as that can be really powerful. I think that’s part of the thing that keeps us in this profession that we feel those connections with students can really be transformative.

**I want to go to that graduation ceremony where you will give that speech. Let’s switch gears to a special object for you. María Elena, I know you sent me this picture of your grandma. And, Tony, I asked you to think of something. So let’s start with you, María Elena. Tell me about this picture of your abuelita [grandmother] Ana Canales that you sent me.**

**María Elena:** Ana, mamama Ani is what we used to call her (in Peru, abuelitas get an extra “ma”). I was thinking a lot about what image to share with you, and honestly I kept going back to her. You know she has been such an important presence in my life for so many reasons. There were moments when my immediate family and I weren’t even on speaking terms and she was always there, always so supportive. So this is her. It’s just a frame that I have by my desk where I do a lot of my work. She’s just always there. This photo was taken when she was about fifteen or sixteen years old. It was a long time ago and she was married at fifteen. She married my grandfather,
who was thirty, twice her age, at a different moment. She had seven children who lived; it was just a very different life. But always so intellectually curious and tough too, really tough. She always asked good questions. When I think about where I am now, how it is I am who I am, I cannot imagine life without her. Having her as a guide pushed me. Sometimes it was about impressing her, making her proud, doing what I thought she would want me to do. Sometimes that guided my life. At moments when I didn’t really feel like I had a path she was just always there. I guess that’s why she’s probably one of the most important people in my life, if not the most important person in my life. Maybe my son now, in a different way, but she’s just always been there. I think having that model was key: she was tough, strong, amazingly kind and generous. Also an amazing cook; she taught me how to cook. There’s just so many different layers. You asked earlier about overcoming obstacles, and there’s lots of things that I could talk about. But she’s the constant. She’s the constant thread from the time that I lived with her for a while, when I was very young. I think from the time before I even left Peru all the way to now, she continues to be a source of strength, inspiration, hope. She is a guide for me. So that’s why I thought of her.

Thank you for sharing that beautiful portrait of her. Tony, what about you?
What do you have?

Tony: Before I tell you what I have I should also say that mamama Ani was also important to me, because there was a time when I was first trying to enter María Elena’s life. A few members of her family, specifically her parents, weren’t sure; they weren’t sold on this guy from the border as being worthy of their daughter. María Elena’s grandmother was always on my side. She would always be really incredibly kind, incredibly welcoming, but I think she’s the reason María Elena’s parents decided that I was all right. We always had a good relationship, and that really was central. She was wonderful. I remember one of the things I’m really grateful for is that Toñito, our son, was able to meet her. We have a wonderful video of mamama Ani singing in Quechua to him. I think until that moment María Elena had no idea that her grandmother knew any Quechua. So really it was a remarkable insight into just how complicated and rich Peruvian life is.

María Elena: She had seen me struggle to try to learn Quechua. But she never told me she spoke it. It was kind of interesting.

Tony: The image that I have here is an image that I share often with my
students. It’s a picture of my great-grandfather Santiago Gallardo, who’s holding me as a very small kid.

*How old are you in this picture?*

**Tony:** Maybe one and a half here. This is the ranch my dad grew up on. A ranch in Casas Grandes, Chihuahua. This picture means a lot to me because my dad’s family originally is from New Mexico. His father, my grandfather, was a miner in New Mexico but got in an accident. He got a little money from the company, and he was able to relocate to Northern Mexico with his relatives, so this is where my dad was born. My grandfather was the first Lucero in many generations who was born on the US side. My dad, because of his father, is a US citizen. Where this picture is taken is a place that I don’t know very well. I had the chance to go and see this place again with María Elena. It is in a place called Casas Grandes, Chihuahua. It was a big ranch, and my great-grandfather worked for one of the big landowners in Chihuahua. When we went to this place, I remember it vividly. Where this door is right now is mostly abandoned; there was a family squatting on the land, and they let us go in. But we couldn’t go into this place where the picture was taken because it had been totally taken over by animals. It was almost out of a García Márquez novel. One room was bats, another room was coral snakes, another room was these birds. It was really wild. I just remember feeling that I was connected to it.

One of the things, to return to a previous question of yours, of why I am where I am is I really want to know where I came from. I really wanted to study Latin American politics because I just felt really disconnected in the history that was mine but also not mine. The other reason I often think about is related to my great-grandfather Santiago, who was born in the 1860s. The way that borders existed then and the way borders exist now is totally different. At that time, this crossing was not a problem. It was fluid, and that enables a way of thinking about what’s possible. In the current moment and the current craziness about the way we think about the border, we think about Mexico, and the way we think about Central America, all those things are fixed and permanent, not fluid. So I think about those long histories about border crossing as ways of thinking that things can always be otherwise. My great-grandfather, even though I didn’t know him very well, reminds me of how far we needed to travel to get to this point, but that there’s also nothing permanent about where we are right now.
OK, so one question for you. How does it work to be part of a dual interview, a couples interview? How has that worked out for you?

Tony: It’s very normal.

María Elena: Yeah it’s really nice. We just had to do another one for my department, the department I work in, Comparative History Ideas (CHID).

Tony: That we both work in.

María Elena: Yeah. There’s this thing called CHID 101. It’s a two-credit class that our advisor teaches, just to introduce new majors to all the faculty. Because we’re doing the Zoom thing, she did it with both of us, and it was really nice. You know each other. You almost know what the other person is going to say, but there are moments when you don’t or you’re surprised. It’s kind of nice to hear that. It’s good.
Thank you for joining me this morning to talk about your work and as part of the Latinx recognition of faculty this year. I’ve been very happy to do all of these interviews, and yours is the next to last one, so we’re almost there. It’s great to have you. First of all Roberto, why don’t you tell us about what you’re being recognized for. What is your work at Children’s Hospital?

I am the Director of Psychiatric Care at Echo Glen Youth Prison. To answer your question about my work at Seattle Children’s, I can answer that first, I guess, and then I will tell you about the publications. I think that’s what the nomination was for. I am the Director of Psychiatric Care and Mental Health Care at one of our youth prisons, I call them prisons because that’s what they are, but they call them rehabilitation centers. It’s a medium to maximum security institution. The kiddos get the best psychiatric care and we try to get to most kids, right now we have about 75% of them who are evaluated by psychiatry because we strongly believe that a lot of social and other factors are driving a lot of the youths experiences that leads them to end up at a place like Echo Glen. So we try addressing the mental health component of it while also trying to do a lot of social advocacy and equity work in the community, trying to form community partners. Here I train residents and fellows on how to work with youth in the juvenile system. So that’s part of my work. My other work, I do research and teach at the medical school where I focus on health equity and discrimination, and the impact that bias has on education and health care outcomes of children. I focus a lot on bias and bias reduction.

That’s excellent. I’m here beating myself up for not starting with a truly open
ended question. I’ve done so many interviews and I’m still learning. I started asking you about what I had seen on your website, your affiliation with the Children’s Hospital, so thank you for not answering my question, but taking it to where you wanted to talk about, your work at Echo Glen. This is constant learning for me, how to honor your experiences and perspective, rather than what I thought wanted to hear. So tell me more about what it is that you are being recognized for.

I think it was the nomination for the work that I’ve been doing for both bias reduction and doctor-patient communication work. I’ve had a few publications come out on how to identify and address microaggression in medicine and medical institutions, which is a topic that really was not getting a lot of attention until recently. One of my publications was really one of the first ones to introduce the concept of microaggression into medical scientific journals.

It had been introduced in the 1970s by the developer Chester Pierce and it had sort of dwindled down so I think my piece rekindled it. It was published in 2016 and has been selected as one of the Journal of the American Medical Association, JAMA, pieces to be republished. They’re celebrating their 40th anniversary. This particular piece, called My Name Is Not Interpreter, was chosen for reprint in the special issue of the 40th anniversary for JAMA, that is coming out in a few days, on May 5th. JAMA is one of the biggest medical journals, and the fact that it was picked up there, with the topic of discrimination, bias, microaggressions and medicine, and not selected for republishing it 4 years later in their 40th anniversary of the series, is a an honor, it’s a big honor. This is what they wrote to me with the selection of my paper:

What an honor to have your essay (My Name Is Not “Interpreter”) chosen as one of the top “A Piece Of My Mind” articles in JAMA in the last 10 years! Based on the journal’s description of their process, this was quite an accomplishment:

Between that first essay published in May 1980 and December 2019, a total of 1302 essays have been published in the A Piece of My Mind column. Collections of essays were republished as books in 1988 and in 2000. Currently, more than 1000 essays are submitted each year and fewer than 50 published. Authors include prominent researchers, physicians in practice, medical students
and residents, other clinicians, and patients or relatives. To honor 40 years of A Piece of My Mind, the editors have compiled 40 favorite essays from the past 10 years. The 10 essays with the most views or citations from each year were reviewed, then narrowed to 40 by discussion. The process was necessarily subjective, reflecting the heart and soul of A Piece of My Mind, and readers may have other favorites.”

Your writing is so powerful. Thank you for getting these thoughts in a place where all of us can learn from them.

The other work that I’ve been doing is on the doctor-patient communication aspect of bias, not just medical encounters. I’m focusing on communication strategies that people can use to try to prevent bias and discrimination in the workplace, using psychological theories and practices that are evidence-based that have shown to be very conducive towards having difficult conversations. I’m applying those same theoretical concepts into difficult conversations about race and racism in medicine. I’ve also been doing work on how doctor-patient communication impacts diabetes management, patient care, and how doctors and patients work really heavily to try to maintain a functional relationship while not jeopardizing concepts or morality. So making the patient feel like they’re a bad patient because their diabetes is poorly controlled. For example, my research focused on how doctors and patients navigate this through communication as well. That’s the research I’ve been working on.

That’s really interesting and really important work. You cover a lot of issues, with the work at Echo Glen, the work on doctor-patient communication and microaggression, and issues of morality in care management. That’s a lot of breath to cover in a single portfolio of work. How does a Latino guy like you end up at the UW medical center, Children’s Hospital, and Echo Glen? What’s the path that brings you here?

That is a great question Ricardo, and it’s a funny question that you ask that today, because it has been a really tough experience so far. As you know there are not many Latinx faculty at the school of medicine, which covers across UW Medical Center and Seattle Children’s, which is part of UW. I think the biggest reason I actually stayed at UW after my fellowship training here was I found some really amazing mentors and advocates that have been really supportive of my work on equity. The underlying
theme with my teaching, my research, and my clinical practice is really about equity. And the fact that I was able to find champions and mentors to protect me from a lot of external sources that are really difficult for a faculty of color has been instrumental. But it is taxing. It’s very taxing to be one of the very few Latinos in academic medicine at UW.

I think the other thing that is important for me to mention is that mentorship and support are going to look very different from what you think. We need to be open to who will be our allies and who will be supporting us. Like I said, my mentors here at UW, you know Leo Morales, and there’s Mayra Kikorian, and then there’s Leslie Walker Harding. Dr. Walker Harding is not Latina, she’s African American, and one of my strongest allies and mentors. So I think it’s really important for students to realize mentoring can look very different, you just have to find a right fit.

I think a great thing about this Latinx recognition is that it’s bringing people together. We tend to be very siloed, I only know two or three other Latino/Latina faculty at the UW. So I think this honor is a great way to show people that there are faculty that are Latino/Latina who have been able to achieve what a lot of other people strive to. It’s just going to take a lot of work, and you can still do it.

Yes. I hope my contribution of helping to collect these stories and to render them more visible is also moving in that direction. That’s what moved me to do the first book a few years ago, when there was the first Latino recognition, and I thought: I want to hear more about all these people that are being recognized, how come I didn’t know that there are all these other Latinos and Latinas at the UW? So that’s what led to make that first book, Latinx@UW, and I’m hoping this second book will be a good sequel to that one, just rendering visible more of us and people like us who are working hard to try to make a difference.

Tell me a bit more about the path that brought you here. It’s good to hear you say that mentors played an important role in helping you stay here and overcome the barriers and exclusion. How did you get here?

Yes, mentors as important. One of my dissertation co-chairs, when I was completing my PhD at UCLA, is Leo Morales. He transferred from UCLA to the University of Washington during my medical training, after I had completed the PhD. I was looking for really top-notch child psychiatry
fellowship programs. I knew the UW had one of the best ones in the West Coast, and I read Dr. Morales was at UW, so I emailed him saying, hey I’m thinking of applying to UW, and he was really encouraging. We set up some meetings and we talked about all the potential work I could do on the Latino/Latina community in Washington. He was one of those mentors I mention that played a big role. Not only recruiting me, but also retaining me. He really laid out the ground of how much need there is for medical service for the Latino/Latina community in Washington. That was enough for me to be really excited, to combine the need to make a difference on Latino community with excellent training in child psychiatry.

That’s really excellent. Now think of youth who are now graduating from high school, in Washington there would be many first generation, many Latinx graduating from high school. Imagine you were invited to give a graduation speech. What would be your message to this new generation of high school graduates right now? How do you motivate them and encourage them to keep on moving forward with higher education?

I think I would say what I would have wanted to hear if I was in the shoes of graduating high school students. I would want to hear the truth, in the sense that you hear a lot of people say that things will get better, higher education is a gateway to opportunity and improvement, which is all true, and things absolutely get better after high school. If you’re able to complete college things get better, but the journey is not easy. The journey will continue to be extremely tough, you will continue to be one of the few people of color, one of the few Latino/Latina people in the room as you progress through your education and as you progress into leadership roles. It doesn’t get any easier, you continue to experience mistreatment and bias and racism throughout your journey. What gets easier is the fact that you start getting a little bit more power and privilege, not as much as your counterparts, but you get more, as your education and leadership roles increase, which helps you make a difference.

“If you’re able to complete college things get better, but the journey is not easy. The journey will continue to be extremely tough, you will continue to be one of the few people of color, one of the few Latino/Latina people in the room as you progress through your education and as you progress into leadership roles. It doesn’t get any easier, you continue to experience mistreatment and bias and racism throughout your journey.”
Unfortunately it’s not always the big type of impact, the large difference that you wish you could make, but at the same time the fact that you can make differences in people’s lives, even if it’s just one person at a time or a small group at a time is really meaningful.

So it’s worth the difficult journey, it’s worth the fatigue that you’re going to experience, and it’s worth the strain it has in your personal self. When you find the right people to support you and you are empowered by the people who are around you, it’s really worth seeing the positive impact that you can have in society.

That’s very beautiful. I’m hearing you say it’s hard, it won’t get easier, but you will then get into a position where you can have more influence to change things, and to make things better for yourself and for others.

You just have to be really patient, because it’s not as fast as you wish it was, it’s not going to be as easy as you wish it would be, and you’re going to have to go through hurdle after hurdle. It’s just a matter of resilience and perseverance that a lot of us have used to face the obstacles that many of us have growing up, and how we’re able to overcome them. So a lot of the hardships we had in high school and in our young adult life build resilience that helps you withstand the hardships you’re going to have, even as your leadership opportunities increase.

Thank you, that’s a really powerful message to the graduating class of high school students. I hope high school students would get a chance to hear what faculty at the UW are saying about this question, I think your message is really powerful.

My last question is about an image or object that is representative of your work and your trajectory here at UW. Did you think of one?

I haven’t thought about that image yet.

That’s even better. I have mixed feelings about sending you the questions in advance. I know it does allow you to be more thoughtful about the answers, which is a good thing. But when asking about a symbolic image that is of importance to you, one thing I’ve found is that the first thing that comes to your mind is usually more powerful than something you think about for a long time. So if I ask you for an image or a symbol that is important to you
and your work, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?

My wife.

Tell me more about your wife.

She’s great. She’s a great person who really knows me better than anyone. She has been there for me since my second year of my PhD, my masters, my dissertation, my medical school exams, my medical school graduation, my fellowships and now as faculty. She’s been the biggest cheerleader, the biggest supporter, the biggest rock for me. I could not have done any of my accomplishments without having such an amazingly strong, intelligent, and very level-headed powerhouse. She just keeps me motivated and is able to put up with a lot of the demands that academia has on people. She’s been very good at keeping me grounded while I try to meet other demands academia has for us.

“My wife is my rock.”
To get started, tell us a bit about why you are being nominated. What do you do? Why are you recognized this year as a Latino faculty at the UW?

Well, I’m not sure! I think I know, but I’m not sure. I think I was nominated because of the project that was funded this year, which we’re calling the Latino Physician Workforce Study. That study really grew out of a conversation that Gino initially had at the Sea Mar Community Health Forum. So once a year, Sea Mar has a health symposium forum, and about a year and a half ago they had a presenter from California that was talking about a similar report done in California - an analysis of the physician workforce - showing that there was a gross underrepresentation of Latino positions in the state of California, which is just amazing because California is 40% Latino. And so, Rogelio Rojas (University of Washington Reagent) suggested to Gino that something similar needs to be done here in Washington.

Three or four weeks later, Gino and I had a conversation with him at Sea Mar. That led to a proposal that we took to the legislature and it was approved. It was pretty amazing. I think that the elected officials who we spoke with saw the importance of bringing light to this issue. It was also timely because there is another initiative to create a pathway into residency programs in Washington for international medical graduates. This is also a way to diversify the physician workforce. These two pieces of work have been moving in parallel and we are in the midst of that project now.

We’ve been able to take data from the State licensing board and we formed
an advisory group made up of some elected officials and policymakers and various stakeholders. The goal of the project is to develop a report with policy recommendations and hold a symposium in October, where that report will be shared, that will bring together various stakeholders from across the state to help highlight the importance of this issue. Symposium attendees will also talk about possible solutions with the goal of having legislation in the 2020-2021 cycle.

I’m very proud that you’ve been doing that kind of work. It makes me proud to be a Latino at UW. So, if you were to step back a bit from what you have been doing on this project, how does a guy like you end up at the UW? What is your path?

Life is interesting. It presents you with opportunities, some expected, some unexpected, and I wish I could say this was all done with intention and mindfulness, but it is not. There are accidents and chance, together with a lot of good fortune and helpful people along the way. Me ending up here definitely was not something I had thought about as a young person. I grew up here in Seattle, but my parents are from Bolivia. They divorced when I was pretty young and so I was really raised by my mother. She had few job skills and while we were never hungry or without a house, we were not well-off people.

I think it was the value that my mother and father placed on education that led me to go to Seattle Prep, which is a Catholic High School here in Seattle, and that really opened my mind to the importance of college. While at Seattle Prep I was not at all clear about where school would lead and I almost dropped out. But I spent some time working and realized college was maybe a good idea. I did not really seriously consider medical school or post-doctoral education until I was nearly a senior in college. At that point a college advisor suggested that I look into medical school. Most students think about medical school at some point, but I never saw myself as being a pre-med undergraduate student. During medical school I thought I would go into practice, but then I got interested in research instead. And eventually that led to a fellowship at UCLA and that led to a faculty position also at UCLA. I had fantastic mentors at UCLA including “Everyone struggles. It is always messy and unclear, and you have to just keep going.”
Ron Hays, Jose Escarce, Carol Mangione, Martin Shapiro, Bob Brooks and many others - all outstanding health services researchers.

*I’m sure your path was not always smooth. What were some things that helped you overcome obstacles and bumps you encountered in the road?*

The audacity for me to consider being in college and doing any of the things that I’ve been able to do is due to my mother. Regardless of my flaws and imperfections, she was always very, very supportive and loving. That gave me the confianza and ganas I needed to get through the rough spots. I think she is the origin of my resilience. Also, over time, the more struggles you go through the better you are at handling what comes next. It teaches you that you can get through the next obstacle.

*Imagine there is a group of high school graduates, many of them are Latinx or first generation, and you’re invited to give their graduation speech. What would be your message?*

I would tell them to pursue what they are passionate about and to allow themselves the time to figure out what they really enjoy doing. I would tell them to focus on those things that they have strengths in and that they enjoy. I think that is the way to excel; and to not be too worried about what is practical and where it takes you.

I think it is a mistake to start out with just one goal in mind without understanding yourself or your strengths. My message would be to find your strengths, pursue your strengths, build your mastery in that area and be open to opportunities when they come your way.

I would also tell them that everyone struggles. It is always messy and unclear, and you have to just keep going.

*What kind of image would you say represents your trajectory or your life?*

I am reflecting back on my early childhood and how I was really shaped by a trip I took as a child. My dad put us in a car, and we drove from Seattle to La Paz, Bolivia in 1968. It was an outrageous and crazy thing to do! It took six months. That trip showed me what is possible when one has the audacity to pursue your dreams and I think my life is similar. From becoming a physician to becoming a UW faculty member, to
conducting research, leading a center on Latino health and publishing research papers in academic journals. I’m grateful to my colleagues, my collaborators, the students I work with, and especially my wife Laurie and son Carlos for supporting me along this journey.
First off, why don’t you tell me a bit about the work that you do and what you are being recognized for?

I belong to a collective of Purépecha people here in the Puget Sound area. Some of them are based in Auburn, some are in Tacoma, some are south of Seattle. The Purépecha people are a group originally from Michoacán, Mexico. My mom’s family is from that area. So, I am originally Purépecha, as well. Within this collective, Ireta Purépecha, we do a lot of work to recover the knowledge of our ancestors. Part of the work that we do is to try to recover our ancestral language because not everyone in the collective speaks the language. I’m one of the ones that don’t speak the language. So, one of our objectives was to create a workshop to teach the Purépecha language to members of our collective and to interested members of the community. The Purépecha language is endangered. There are less and less people that speak the language. In the US, it’s even more vulnerable because the younger generations either speak mostly English, or English and Spanish. Less of the younger generations are learning Purépecha, so it’s definitely something that worries the community.

When we started thinking about creating this workshop, I started looking for funding. I applied to an internal grant at University of Washington, Tacoma, and I got it. It is called a Collaborative Publicly Engaged Scholarship (CPES) program. I began working with the members of the collective to create materials for teaching and to do the workshops. In the spring of 2019, we had the workshop at UW-T. It was free and open to anyone in the community. It was a great experience for all of us, and we learned a lot. We had the objective of continuing these workshops, but we would have to look for more funding. But right now, with the pandemic, we
have everything on hold. Recently, the collective applied for a new grant through King County and got it. It’s to create materials in our Indigenous language to inform the community about COVID-19. We are starting to figure out what we’re going to do, but we also want to provide a space for other Indigenous communities or migrant Indigenous communities to create materials in their Indigenous language, so they can provide it to the migrant communities in Washington.

That is really fascinating. Tell me a bit more about how you ended up here. How does a Latina woman like you end up being here as UW faculty?

It’s a bit complicated, but I’ll give you the short version. I was born in Canada, but I’m Mexican, and I lived in Spain as a little girl. I migrated to Oregon when I was fourteen and lived there for many years, and I lived in Mexico City for many years. I studied for my PhD at the University of Western Ontario, in the same city where I was born, in London, Ontario. The last year of my PhD, I was finishing my dissertation, and I saw the post for this Spanish position at UW-T. So, I applied, and I got it. I applied here for two reasons. The first one is because I lived in Oregon for many years, and I just love the Pacific Northwest. Also, my family lives on Vancouver Island, so it’s closer for me to go there from here. Another reason is because during my dissertation I had done field work here, so I knew that there was a large Purépecha community in the Puget Sound. It was a no-brainer for me to come to UW. I thought this would be really a great opportunity to be closer to my community, without having to go back to Mexico.

That’s excellent. The path for a Latina academic is not always very straightforward. In that trajectory between Mexico and Canada, a bit of Spain that you mentioned, what are some things that helped you overcome obstacles along the way?

It’s my culture. It’s what gives me the drive to navigate this strange world for us. It is very difficult as a minority and as a woman to navigate academia. I’ve gone through a lot of difficult things in this country, and we always have to defy the idea that as a Latino you’re not destined to have

“My culture is what gives me the drive to navigate this strange world for us. It is very difficult as a minority and as a woman to navigate academia.”
aspirations or to do better. The system is constantly putting roadblocks and making things difficult. But I also knew that studying was going to help surpass a lot of these blocks. My dad did it. He comes from humble beginnings in Mexico, and he studied for a PhD. So, I knew that I had to study, and knew that it would help. I began with my undergrad at the University of Oregon, but after that I had to leave the country. I knew that if I ever came back to the US, I wanted to do it to serve my community. If I had the possibility to study, because not everyone has it, I wanted to serve and be useful to my community. Also, since I was a little girl, because my name is Itziri and it’s a Purépecha name, I always had the idea that I wanted to contribute to the maintenance of our Indigenous languages because they’re vulnerable and disappearing. When you lose the language, you lose culture and you lose ancestral knowledge. That was the case with my family. My great-grandparents didn’t transmit the language to my grandfather, and then not to my mother, and then not to me or my brother. My name, in a way, reminds me of my ancestral roots and reminds me to honor my ancestors. That’s what took me to study linguistics. This discipline gave me the tools to get closer to my language. A language that I’ve always wanted to learn and that we lost three generations ago. It was a dream for us to get to know more about my culture, to study linguistics, to study for my PhD, and to enter academia.

Imagine you were invited to give a speech at a high school graduation where there are a lot of first-generation Latino and Latina kids. What would you tell them? What would be your message to high school graduates, especially Latino?

I would tell them that I was once one of them. I completed high school in Oregon, and the truth is that I struggled a lot in high school. I spoke English, but somehow, I didn’t understand everything. I was always lost and confused. Also, every time I tried to take an upper level class, like an AP class or an honors class, there was never any support for it. Usually, I was the only person of color in those classes, and I always felt like an outsider. But truly, I’ve always loved learning. I kept going, regardless of everything that was going around me.

The other thing was that back then, because my dad kept coming in and out of the country for his job in Mexico, I always had the insecurity of not knowing whether I was going to have a visa or not. That was definitely a struggle. I didn’t know what I was going to do my senior year in high
school. I didn’t know if I was going to have a visa to go to college. I actually applied to the University of Oregon, but I didn’t get in on the first try. So, I went back to Canada to study engineering. I started a program and I realized that it wasn’t for me—but that’s OK. Then, I returned to Oregon and I entered a community college. I took classes just to see what I liked and what I was interested in. There were things that I truly loved and there were things I did not like so much—but that’s OK.

Eventually, I got the credits to transfer to the University of Oregon. There, I started taking the Spanish classes, and that’s when I realized that I really loved it. I loved the culture classes, the literature classes, and even the grammar classes. When I took my first linguistics class, I completely fell in love with it. I had finally found what I had been looking for without really knowing what I was looking for. That opened so many doors and possibilities for me. So, based on my journey and my experience, I would tell high school students to not be afraid, to explore, and to find what they love and make them passionate. There’s always a major or a field that can fulfill people’s interest.

If you’re undocumented, I think there’s always a way to do it. A lot of us did it back then. I did it and it was back before DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) existed. I’m one of the Dreamers that was at the rallies. It’s really nice to see that now, with the DACA program, a lot of talented people and students have opportunities. I’m fortunate enough to teach students that are like me. It’s really nice to see that I’m not the only person of color in these classrooms anymore.

Tell me more about the picture that you sent me, and what it represents for you.

This is a grammar book of the Purépecha language. This was given to me by one of my uncles in Mexico, about ten years ago. He found it in a book fair, and because he knew that I wanted to learn the language, he gave it to me. Since then, I’ve had it with me. Everywhere I go it comes with me. It was with me during my PhD. It came with me when I was doing field work in the Purépecha communities in Lake Pátzcuaro and the Indigenous communities in Michoacán. I did my dissertation on language contact between Spanish and Purépecha. It’s like my first contact with the language. It’s falling apart, but it’s been with me ever since. The second thing is the rebozo [shawl]. This is the typical rebozo that the
Purépecha women wear. What’s interesting is that I actually got it here in Washington from a girl that was visiting. I had been looking for one with this specific pattern for a while and I hadn’t been able to find it. In a way it symbolizes my journey—how I’ve been all over the world. And how it wasn’t until I got to Washington and got the job at UW-T that I came to find my community. Now I’m learning my language, connecting to my ancestral roots, and understanding why I’m called Itziri.

*That’s very beautiful. Thank you for sharing this with me. It’s really beautiful to hear you talk about your own quest and how you found a home for yourself here.*
Dr. Ariana Ochoa Camacho

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL STUDIES, SCHOOL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS & SCIENCES, UW TACOMA

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Ariana, thank you for joining me for this conversation. I’m really happy to be having these conversations with the Latinx faculty about their experiences and what brings them to this place and time. I’d love to hear more about your experience and your background, but before that, why don’t you tell me more about what you’re being recognized for? What is your work and what are you being recognized for this year in the Latinx Recognition?

Ah, I’m not sure.

That is excellent. What is your best guess?

My best guess is that in the last year, I’ve published two articles and had two national fellowships. So it would be one or some of that.

Tell me about them.

This year I’m a Woodrow Wilson early-career fellow. I was awarded that fellowship last spring, and I am also the American Association of University Women American Postdoctoral Fellowship, which funds work after your dissertation to enhance your career or the impact of your research. I think the Woodrow Wilson fellowship is really a career enhancement, so it’s really about helping me plot the course for my career and supporting me by giving me a mentor and some additional professionalization resources and time—time for research, which is so precious and so critical.
That AAUW focused on my research project and its impact on women and girls. Some of the research that I do is very invested in feminist methodologies but also in documenting the experiences of women or girls. One research project is not about Colombians, but the other research project that I do is, so really I’m bringing those voices out. I think that those two fellowships are recognizing the work I’ve done in those areas. AAUW also includes a focus on mentorship, which is something that is very important to me and part of the reason I became a faculty member, quite frankly, versus maybe pursuing research in a public policy sector or something like that.

So tell me a bit more about your path. How does a Latina woman like you end up as UW faculty?

That’s a really good question. I’ve never been somebody who has said, “I’m going to do this or that when I grow up” and just done it, as if it was a straight line. I came to the US when I was young, in kindergarten. I had started school in Colombia, and because of the timing, I had to wait a year. I was very upset because I loved reading, I loved school. I never stopped loving reading, but I did not like school. Growing up here in the States, I didn’t have positive educational experiences. I was tracked and I was put into speech pathology because of speaking Spanish. And so I had that trajectory where I, through a lot of guidance and a focus on education and my family, made it through to college, and then said, “No más. I’m not going to do this. I don’t know why would go to graduate school and continue to torture myself.”

Later, I found my way back to mentoring through the work I was doing in the community. I left with an undergraduate degree in anthropology, with a focus on cultural anthropology and a triple minor in biology, which a lot of people don’t know about me. I made it to my senior year in both majors and then they offered a senior culminating seminar for each at the same time during my spring semester of my senior year. So I had to pick majors and at that point, I knew I didn’t want to be a laboratory biologist and that I didn’t like statistics that much personally. Even though I’ve taken a lot of statistics, a lot of population biology, ecology, all this stuff uses tons of statistics, so I have some really great quantitative skills that I was able to use later, but I didn’t want to pursue that area.

I finished school and worked largely in community-work nonprofits. I
worked for the San Francisco Foundation. I did environmental justice work. And then kind of found myself at a crossroads, realizing I needed a graduate degree to continue to grow professionally. And so I went back for my master’s degree at San Francisco State thinking, “I’ll just get a master’s and then I’ll be able to kind of move to leadership positions and whatnot,” so I have a master’s degree in communication studies from San Francisco State.

But in the process of doing that master’s, I realized I still really loved all the reading and the research, that I still had that kind of critical inquiry set and that I enjoyed the writing. All that time I was participating in youth mentorship activities, so I was a soccer player growing up, I was quite a good and skilled soccer player, and so I coached, and I refereed. Through coaching, through sports and working with girls in sports, I realized that I enjoyed the mentorship of working with other young women, and helping them figure out their direction. I loved guiding them through what their available options might be that might match their talents, their needs, and their goals. So I did that work for quite a while in the Bay Area, and then realized “Oh, I could maybe integrate this and these things together through this profession.”

I had a really great mentor in graduate school who took me aside and said, ‘You know, you seem like you would really enjoy this, and here are some options.’ And so I had some good mentorship myself finally that led me to getting the doctorate. You see how I don’t have what you would consider a traditional trajectory to graduate school, or the doctorate.

I have other significant work experience before I went back for graduate school, I had two successful careers before I went back, and I think all those things make me a better teacher, able to relate to my students in ways that I wouldn’t have been able to do without the life experiences. My work has always involved immigrant communities. Even the environmental justice work was really focused on immigrant communities, and so I’ve continued my focus on immigrant communities since being a community organizer.

*Part of my own experience is also very convoluted, I also have a circuitous path to a PhD and to academia, so I can completely resonate with that. Now if you look back on that trajectory, I’m sure there were a lot of obstacles on the road, roadblocks and troubles and boulders that appeared. Rather than*
focusing on the problems, why don’t you tell me a bit about what helped you overcome obstacles that presented themselves on the road? Where do you draw from? What gives you energy? What gave you the wherewithal to overcome obstacles that come in your way to becoming a successful academic at the UW today?

Well, I think that there were a lot of things. For example, my grandmother, my mother’s mother, she didn’t have the opportunity to get much of an education, so her reading and writing skills were pretty basic. She was someone who, as a refrain I heard growing up, something like, ‘They can take away your money. They can take all your things away, but they cannot take away your education.’ That focus on learning and education, that really comes from my grandmother, who didn’t have the opportunity to have an education. She instilled that in my mom and my mom instilled in us, all three of us. I have an older sister and a younger brother. All three of us went on to get graduate degrees. There were really high expectations in my household and from my grandmother, in particular, for us to pursue the highest level of education that was available to us.

My parents divorced when I was later in high school, around a junior, and my mother was really pressed financially at that moment when I was about to go to college. But it was really the high expectations from my grandmother, who had’t had education, as something that she thought was really critical to our future stability and success, as something she recognized she didn’t have access to. So being able to appreciate whatever opportunity presented itself to us for pursuing that education and to make the best of it, whatever it meant. If it meant I couldn’t go to college to do something that kept me growing and learning always, and I think it’s that that is the fundamental impulse that’s very ingrained through my mother, through my grandmother in all of us in my family to really push ourselves and develop and grow and learn and follow whatever opportunity we have to enhance that growth in our learning.

That’s really beautiful. So if you were now to go back to high school and give a graduation speech, what would you have to say to a new generation of high school graduates who are considering going to college? Many of them might be first-generation graduating high school. What would be your message to them?

I would tell them not to let anybody else decide what their capacities
were, first of all, not to let others convince them to underestimate themselves, and to try to develop those capacities through whatever channels they could that were available to them. Even if that means waiting to go to college, keep reading. Even if that means not going to college and pursuing another career first, that there are all sorts of ways of getting to it. There are a lot of paths to a lot of goals, and there’s not just one right way to get there, but that there might be a way that they can figure out that is supportive to them.

And to seek out mentorship. I think that’s what I would tell myself as a high school student, because I really lacked mentorship. For example, I didn’t realize my own capacities until a bit later. It was only in college, really, when I got some good interaction with faculty. Because I went to a public school that was very generic and I didn’t get a lot of stimulation. I was often pre-judged for my capabilities because of my background.

I had my guidance counselor tell me I should go to a two-year community college as opposed to a four-year college. I’m glad I didn’t listen. I’m glad that I understood my own capabilities enough to tell myself not to let their assessment of my capabilities drive me, but to really trust what I knew about myself and my capabilities. But I do think seeking out mentorship is key, because if I had had better mentorship, I might not have had some of the struggles that I had. I didn’t realize that there were some resources, I just didn’t know about many resources along the way that I could have used to help me continue to move through to my goals.

**How does one go about finding mentors?**

Participating in structured programs that are mentorship programs is one way, but also recognizing mentorship in many different forms. The adults in your life that are engaging with you. Your professors can be mentors too, your teachers. Also, other adults who are doing things that are interesting to you, seeking them out to learn about their own paths. I think the more you learn about the variety of paths, the more you’re going to understand what you want your own path to be.
photography. I like to ask people to either take a picture or think of an image or an object or a sculpture or something that symbolizes their story. What is some image or object that is important to you, that symbolizes your work as a Latina on the faculty at the UW?

I have a coffee cup that was one of the first things that my family bought when we moved to the US. I have a lot of memories of these. We had a set of these Sears Roebuck coffee cups, and we only had one left, and I have that particular cup. So I think about the cup as symbolizing this kind of weird circuitous path, from Colombia to Louisiana, then to Michigan, and now here. It has followed me through that path. And I think that this cup was a cup my father acquired when he lived in the US before I was born, and then took it to Colombia and then we brought it back.

Show me, show me, show me! Do you have it handy?

OK. I have to go get it. It’s in my back room. So excuse me for a moment. [Ariana walks to the kitchen to fetch the cup, followed by her dog]. So it’s this, and there’s nothing really particularly special about the cup, other
than I have these memories of sitting, as a kid, having just arrived to the US, drinking milk from this cup. So it’s just this Sears catalog mug, this little thing, and for some reason, my family had a set of these that traveled with us.

So you say there’s nothing special about this cup, but it’s the memories that you have that make it special. That is what I find most interesting. Tell me more about the memories of holding this cup, and what this cup represents for you.

I think it just reminds me of where we started, that my trajectory is connected to my parents, which are connected to their parents, that it’s a multigenerational process of where you end up, and who you are is also so much more than just about you. It’s about who came before you and helped chart the way. I look at this cup, and I feel really disconnected from the actual images on the cup because I don’t actually relate to any of these things. This is not even my culture in any way.

This is like stuff you would see in a museum, and I don’t relate to it, but I just have memories of holding this, and looking at this weird little doll here, and the prices and the swimming suit, this 1920s swimming suit. I think it has more to do with that. This cup symbolizes my trajectory. It is one of the only things I have from my family. I don’t have a lot from my family. I think we brought one or two suitcases with us when we moved to the US, and this was one of the things. I don’t have a lot of things like pictures or furniture or things that remind me of what that trajectory is. A lot of people have an antique or an heirloom that’s been passed down, and I have this weird Sears Roebuck cup.

Thank you for sharing your cup with me.
Thank you for joining us today. It’s great to see you again after your participation in the first book based on Latinx recognition. Tell me, why are you being recognized this time?

I’m being recognized for some of my research projects. Last spring I was fortunate to have my first sabbatical, which was great. I spent a lot of that time working on a review paper on the health of undocumented immigrants, and that paper was just published last month in the Annual Review of Public Health, which is a really important journal. They only take invited submissions and tend to focus on the key issues in public health that year. So it was a nice time for me to take a break, to think about the work that I have done up till now, what I want to do moving forward, and figure out where my work fits within the field.

That’s excellent. Well congratulations on that new paper. Now, can you tell me a bit more about how what led you up to this? How does a Latina woman like you end up at the UW faculty, publishing a paper in the Annual Review of Public Health?

I think part of me always wanted to be a professor. Growing up, I remember learning about how there were very few Latinas with PhDs and I saw that as I continued in college. I could not find any Latina mentors. Actually, I think I just had one Latina professor when I was an undergrad at Brown in a Latino studies class, but really didn’t have any Latino mentors within public health. And not through my master’s either. Finally, when I was a PhD student, I had one Latina mentor. But unfortunately she left after the first year of my PhD program. And so, even then it was a struggle. But I just saw the need: the need for more visibility, the need for more
research to be done by Latinos in this community. And I kept going.

I just kept persevering. It was my dream job to come to the University of Washington. And I was really lucky that I was able to get a job here when I finally was ready to be faculty.

*Excellent. When you encounter obstacles, roadblocks and bumps in the road, what helps you? What do you do?*

I think my family has always been very supportive and encouraging. My parents have always been very encouraging. I also have siblings, both older siblings and younger siblings, some people to look up to, but I also wanted to be a good role model for my younger siblings. I actually have a sister who’s in a PhD program now, and that’s kind of fun to see that she’s continuing towards the same path potentially being a professor or being in academia.

I think my son has given me a lot of strength as well. I was actually just reading my dissertation again because I had to consult a theory that I had used in my dissertation for some revisions on a paper, and I noticed that I had my son the same year that I defended my dissertation. I had dedicated my dissertation to him, which was sweet. You know, he was one at the time. Now he’s like a real person. So it was funny to think of me dedicating something to a one-year-old whom I didn’t even really know then, but he continued to be a source of strength and inspiration.

Your family always keeps you grounded, and it’s most important to keep the work-life balance. I think you need that balance to be successful in this field.

*That’s excellent. How old is your son now?*

He’s almost twelve.

*A few years away from graduating from high school.*

Yes, I have a few more years left with him.

*So imagine you were to speak to a high school graduation group right now. Presumably one where there are a bunch of first-generation students who*
graduate from high school. Many Latinx students, too. What would be your message to motivate them, to encourage them to keep on moving forward?

I think it’s just really important that you find a career path and a life path that makes you happy. And that your career is something that you love to do, because you’re going to do it almost every day. Especially if you end up in academia, you will do that. For me, one of the most important lessons that I learned early on, maybe in my twenties, was that the sweet spot is finding something that you’re both good at and that you love to do, and if you can get at the intersection of those two places where things come easily to you because you’re naturally good at them and things that you love doing, then it won’t feel like work to go to work every day.

It’ll make for a very fulfilling career. And I think the other layer that I would add on top of that is the idea of doing meaningful work, knowing that your work is somehow helping the lives of others. I think having meaning in your work is also important.

Excellent. Now, a few years ago, when we met for my earlier book on Latinx at UW, we met at the art museum and we talked about your work, and you showed me some pictures. I remember you brought your cap from graduation and you had some pictures with your advisor. What do you have today to celebrate your new accomplishments? What object or image do you want to talk about that is of importance to you?

Right now, since I’m spending so much time at home on account of the pandemic, I’m thinking about my house. My home is a place that is very nourishing and safe. It’s a place that I’ve invested a lot into, and I’m thinking of my house as both a physical home and a spiritual home, and of how important it has been during this time to just have a place where you feel at home.

I did a remodel of my house and my kitchen last year, and I think it’s been really fun just to be home and enjoy cooking in my kitchen. So I think that my house connects me to the things that I love, where I’m spending a lot of time with my family, but also connects me to food, connects me
to music. So I think those are all the things that are getting me through this particularly rough time, and they also nourish me during other times as well.

*Is there a particular image that you’re thinking of your house? You mentioned the kitchen.*

Yeah, I know, I could take you there.

*Would you?*

I’ll take you in here [walking to the kitchen with laptop].

*That is the benefit of doing the interview on Zoom, that I can be in your kitchen.*

I know, I know. Here’s my kitchen. That’s my favorite wall of my kitchen. I really wanted to have some color and life in my kitchen. So there’s my special tile wall and my nice fancy stove, and I have my cookbooks. You can see there’s some Mexican cookbooks.
To get started, why don’t you tell us a bit about what you do that got you to be recognized as a Latino scholar on the faculty at the University of Washington this year?

I’m a physician scientist at the University of Washington School of Medicine. I have a very exciting job description where I do some clinical work taking care of patients. In my primary appointment, I work with cancer patients, but the bulk of my job duties is focusing on research. My research for the last ten years plus has been focusing on leukemia. Leukemia is a very aggressive cancer of the blood.

If folks have known people with leukemia, they know that the treatments are very intense, and very toxic, where patients deal with nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, and their hair may fall out. Unfortunately, our best chance for a cure for many of these cancers of the blood is to pursue a bone marrow stem cell transplant. That’s when we give patients very high doses of chemotherapy and body radiation to make room for the new blood stem cells, and then we rescue the patient from that state by giving them the donor’s stem cells. These new bone marrow stem cells will then grow and develop to make the new blood system for the patients, without any residual leukemia or blood cancer left. The process is rather intense and toxic; thus the bulk of my research is trying to find more targeted ways to do treatments for cancers of the blood so that we don’t have a lot of this off-target associated toxicity, like the nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, and the hair falling out.

As a researcher, I get to do exciting work at the lab, working with animal models of leukemia, specifically trying new therapies, in a safe, targeted
approach, in order to minimize involving other normal organs and in that way minimize toxicity. As a physician scientist, I take whatever works in our models, translate that approach, and take it to the clinic in the form of clinical trials for patients who may need innovative treatments. I love the full spectrum of my day-to-day job. For that part of my job duties, I was recently awarded a grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). It is a five-year grant for over $4 million to find more effective ways to treat cancers of the blood so that patients can have better chances of cure, without all that off-target, extra toxicity, and side effects of systemic chemotherapy that makes people feel rather crummy.

Excellent description. What is the path that brought you here, to the faculty at the UW School of Medicine?

If you go all the way back to the beginning, I have a rather atypical background from other traditional faculty. I grew up outside of Los Angeles, in one of the many barrios [neighborhoods] out that way, in los one ways in Norwalk, California. Again, like most of those settings, when I looked around, the people who were “successful” were the ones who had money, and fancy cars, or fancy clothes, but that usually was because of the drug deals going on. I knew early on that that was not going to be a viable, sustainable, long-term plan for me. I was able to connect with MESA and other high school programs that could show you how it could be different elsewhere: different outlets, different viable career paths for folks that looked like me, who grew up in places that looked like my neighborhood. Early on, they exposed me to engineering, math, science, and some engineers! That’s how I knew, “I’m going to be an engineer. That’s my ticket out. That’s going to be my job out of here. That’s going to be sustainable. That’s not going to get me locked up, and it’s not going to get me killed.”

So as an undergrad at the University of California, Los Angeles, I was able to do summer internships at different engineering companies. I realized that, depending on the kind of work you did, at some engineering places you just sat there, did a lot of the same things over and over, waited for the next assignment, the next position, the next challenge.

But there was one summer where I interned at a pharmaceutical company, working on a drug for HIV. This was at the beginning, when we were figuring out how HIV could be treated. My summer project was finding an efficient, effective way to synthesize an intermediate reagent. I just
Loved the idea of doing work that could help thousands, if not millions, of people. That’s really where I got hooked on the importance of biomedical research. After that, I started graduate school at the University of Washington. Because of my background and where I started, I had not done the in-depth exploring to appreciate the different career paths and different types of research. When I started grad school, I realized that a lot of the research is important, but not all of it was always directly impacting the patients; I wanted my work to have some sort of impact, some sort of bearing on people around you. That’s where I really started to redirect towards the MD/PhD pathway. After starting graduate school, I then did a couple years of med school through the MD/PhD program. Then, I put medical school on pause to go back to finish my PhD. Then, I came back to finish medical school and continue with my clinical training. This very long MD/PhD pathway is something that I did because I knew that I wanted to do clinically relevant research, but research that made an impact in the clinic, not just research that was going to have clinical implications in ten, twenty, or even thirty years down the road. Obviously, I didn’t know about this MD/PhD pathway during my years at UCLA for lack of exploration.

But I found this path because of a lot of other folks, their wisdom, their selfless guidance, and their mentorship and sponsorship. It was mentors, formal and informal, that showed me what those next steps were, and what were different effective ways to get there. I believe I am here, on UW’s School of Medicine Faculty, because it’s a testament to everybody else’s efforts, faith, and guidance. That has gotten me to this point.

And now that I’m here, I realize I can’t do this alone. That’s why it’s important that I continue to do mentoring and outreach efforts to get a more diverse cadre of scientists to tackle the challenging, diverse set of problems around us. Only that will get us the most creative and best ideas from diverse input. But we need to have diverse perspectives in various positions. For example, when I was first starting medical school, folks would say, “Oh, you’re going to med school. You’re going to be a general practitioner down in the free clinic and help our community, because we need you.” I really struggled with that in the beginning because I’ve known I’m a big lab rat. I love doing science. I love doing research. And I get excited about that. Just like there are others who are equally passionate about doing the clinical work and working in the community health centers.
It took me a long time to accept that I can still be mindful of my community and the people I come from, by giving input into the research agenda. I love being at the table where I get to have some say on what is important research, what kind of research should happen, and what should get funded. Because I want the research that comes out to be applicable to everyone, not just the select few. For example, in the field of cancers with the blood, there are some exciting novel ways to treat these cancers, but it involves taking people’s immune cells with a certain genetic background, which will only work in people of that same background. A lot of that research is being done in the patient population with Caucasian majority background.

While that technology may translate easily into other communities that don’t have that background, when will that happen? What happens in the interim, as they sit on the sidelines and others partake in these breakthroughs? I’ve been focused on doing research that’s going to have a potential benefit for everyone, not just certain populations, and without ignoring other populations that have already been ignored or marginalized for far too long. That’s what keeps me here now and reminds me that I have to bring others with me, to remind everyone that the fruit of our research should benefit everyone, not just certain pockets of patients.

*How do you work to overcome obstacles that show up in the way?*

Seeking help from a lot of people. A lot of what I told you has been out the health sciences and the UW Medical School side. But during my graduate training, I got through it because of my roommate, my peer cheerleading squad, who has helped me through graduate school, but also through people like Cynthia Morales and people from GO-MAP. They’re really out there watching out for us and making sure that we get through. I specifically remember that I got to a point where most of my research was done, and I just had to hunker down and write that dissertation. Well, how do you write your dissertation? You’re going to need a laptop or computer, right? But for a lot of us, depending on where we come from, access to technology, personal computers, especially back then, is a real issue. But Cynthia was able to help me brainstorm, knock on different doors and help me get a laptop so that it would not be an issue for me, and so that I could get to the finish line. Another example of the many folks that have made an impact to get me to this point. To support others
coming up is important work that needs to continue, and it’s being done by many selfless individuals. Folks in the pipeline or ones even considering coming on board need to know this help is available so that they can take advantage of the help as well.

Now, if you were invited to go back to LA and speak to a class of high school, what would you tell them? What would be your message to them?

Likely a lot of what I already tell my current mentees, mostly current undergrads, some high-schoolers and some college grads. I think it’s important for us to remember you only know what you know, but you don’t know what you don’t know! A lot of it is based on what you’ve seen and what you’ve been exposed to. But we haven’t seen what we haven’t been exposed to, which is a lot of what’s out there. If you haven’t been exposed to it, you’d never know it exists, and you may not even consider it. You may not even plot your course towards that goal because you need to know it exists and see a bridge there. I think the important thing is that you start to take those next steps on your own to explore. You’ve got to explore.

Let’s say you’re interested in a particular career pathway. Start talking to people in that area and explore it. Ask yourself, “Is this something I really want to do? Or, is there something else that’s closely related to it that I didn’t even know existed until I talked to so and so?” You’ve got to go out there, explore, and see what is going to be the perfect fit for you and your interests.

When I started grad school, or even when I started the fellowships, I didn’t know that the research I do now even existed. It was only when I started shopping around to find what research work I wanted to do during my clinical training portion of the fellowship that I realized,”Oh, this sounds more exciting than these other ideas that I had.” There’s a lot of value in taking the time upfront to explore options.
Some people will say my trajectory was rather circuitous. I’ve been told, “You have been all over the place. First engineering, then graduate school, before redirecting to medical school, then back to grad school, and then again back to medical school.” Had I done my homework early on and explored those different pathways, I possibly could have realized by my second or even third year of undergrad to say, “I’m going to do the MD/PhD pathway, and here’s what I need to do to get there.” Instead, I came about it through the back end because my exploration was rather late. So, it’s important to not limit yourself. Go out there, talk to people and explore because that’s how you’re going to find your real passion and really broaden your acceptance of what’s supposed to be your path. Many of us, because of our backgrounds, because of our neighborhoods, are not exposed to a lot of the other possibilities out there. And so, we have to go out and meet the folks who are eager to help us get to our goals.

*Thank you. You know in some of the work I do I use objects and pictures and illustrations to prompt a conversation. What have you thought would be your object or picture to talk about?*

One of the pictures is of me during my graduate school years when I received the Nickens Award. The Nickens Award was a $5,000 award from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) that recognizes important work with diversity and equity and inclusion.
from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), which is an umbrella organization for all the medical schools. This award recognizes important work with diversity and equity and inclusion. I was one of the five medical students across the country who was recognized for this type of work. The UW Medicine newsletter did a writeup, and there’s a picture of me at the lab. I’m at the bench area, and the camera is looking across the bench. I’m hunkering down pipetting away, looking at my petri dish, or maybe it was a 96-well plate. This image, in my mind, captures the bulk of my existence here at the UW. It really encapsulates it. A lot of this research trajectory is time consuming, and it’s really hard to clock in and clock out. You’re never done. There’s always that paper to write. There’s always that next grant to work on, or that next experiment to design and launch. Even on the weekends or holidays. To get the job done, it requires that kind of commitment, even if it means missing out on family events, etc. I don’t like that part of personal sacrifice, but it comes with the territory if you want your science to come along quickly, and to be good quality science. But again, we’ve got to remember that it’s not just about the science alone, but whom it will impact. All of that’s going to take a lot of time. If it is going to be impactful, you need to give it its due time and effort.

*When you see yourself there, with the purple gloves and the pipettes, what do you wish you had known then?*

There’s so much. I wish I would have known back then what I’m still discovering now as I navigate this realm. Clearly, the importance of mentorship is probably like numbers one, two, and three out of the top five. For a while there, especially during some of my clinical training, I didn’t really take advantage of that, and it had different implications. Being able to identify, appreciate, and take advantage of mentorship is important. Also, that it’s a two-way street. It’s OK to say, “This isn’t quite meeting my needs. Let me see if I can ask differently.” Then you and your mentor can have a good idea of how they can help you. It also took me a while to appreciate that it’s OK to find a different mentor if what you’re needing at that time is not being met by a particular person. I’ve realized that I have a handful of different mentors, depending on the task. I didn’t really appreciate that you can’t just have one mentor for it all. It doesn’t come that way. I think different people have different strengths. You need to take advantage of those different strengths, from different individuals, for different needs. So that’s probably the most valuable nugget that I have for me from back then.
You were going to mention another picture that you offered?

So that second picture is a picture that I and my mentor took a few years ago. It is the obligatory picture of me as the scientist, in the white coat, in the lab, where you see the benches and the pipette tips and all that other lab stuff. I think it’s important that people see that scientists can look just like them—different people with differences. So that they can warm up to the idea that they, too, can be a scientist, and not have it be something that’s so far off that they could never see a connection.

It’s also meaningful because we took it when I was doing my progress report for the AMFDP national meeting. The aim of the Amos Medical Faculty Development Program, as a national program, is geared toward junior faculty from diverse backgrounds. The idea is to give us the mentorship and the skill set so that one day we can become the department chairs, or vice-deans, or deans at various institutions. So, very impactful positions of power, where we can really have an impact on a wider scale. That was another great and valuable program that I have benefited from.
Thank you Jacqueline for agreeing to be part of this collection of stories of Latinx honorees this year. To start off, would you like to tell me a bit about yourself and why you are being honore? What accomplishments are you most proud of this year?

This year I obtained the Sloan Research Fellowship in Ocean Sciences, which is a very prestigious fellowship given by the Alfred Sloan Foundation. This fellowship honors early career faculty in the US and Canada who have the potential to revolutionize their field of study.

Tell me the reason you were given this fellowship.

I obtained this fellowship for my work in climate change biology. My research centers around how organisms are going to be affected by climate change. I work in the tropics in Hawaii and I work in the temperate ecosystems, like here in the Pacific Northwest.

In Hawaii, I work with coral reefs and in the Pacific Northwest, I study shellfish. At both sites, I perform experiments to understand how ocean warming and ocean acidification can affect survival and reproduction. I’m interested in understanding what happens when marine animals are affected by high temperatures and whether they can survive and have enough energy to reproduce. Ultimately, like any mother that has babies, you want to be strong, so you can ensure the success of your offspring. Healthy mothers and healthy babies ensure the success of future generations and the replenishment of marine life.

In Hawaii, we do in vitro reproduction with corals. We get sperm or eggs
from corals and make crosses to see whether or not the embryos are going to be resilient to high temperatures. I also try to understand what resilient corals do to stay alive, or what differentiates the resilient corals from the non-resilient corals.

That’s excellent. Especially at this time of denial of global warming, it is critical to have more science-based evidence of what is happening.

Yes. Although pollution is another big problem in the oceans. In Hawaii I also work with microplastics. Microplastics are tiny plastics that are smaller than the tip of a pencil. Unfortunately, microplastics are all over the place. They are all around the ocean, maybe also in your blood and in the water you drink. I study the type of microplastics that are eaten by corals, and whether stressed corals are more vulnerable to plastic pollution.

In the Pacific Northwest I study shellfish that have high cultural, economic and/or ecological value. I study how ocean acidification and ocean warming will impact the ability of shellfish to produce their shells and grow. Ocean acidification (when waters become more acidic due to low pH) is common in this region and can be a big problem for the shellfish industry. If shellfish (i.e. abalone, oysters, mussels, scallops) cannot calcify or produce their shells, then it might be easier for them to get eaten, or they might not be able to grow well or develop. In my lab, we are examining what traits make shellfish more resilient to ocean warming.

That is really interesting and important work to be doing currently. Now tell me, how does a Latina woman, like yourself, end up on the faculty of the University of Washington doing research like this? What brought you here?

I think I am the only Latina in the entire College of the Environment who is tenure-track faculty. And I am the first Latina ever hired in 99 years within the Department; the department is 100 years old and never had a Latina. So of course, it is very unusual.

What brought me to the U.S. has to do with my interest in being near the ocean. I grew up in Mexico, until I was 22 years old. So, I went through all my education in Mexico. I did my bachelor’s degree in Mexico, in Oceanography in Ensenada, Baja California. I just like the ocean. I like living things and I like to conserve them. One time, when I was a sophomore, I saw an
ad of an application from the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología CONACYT (National Council for Science and Technology). It is basically like the Mexican National Science Foundation. They had a fellowship where you could go for a summer to take a tropical marine biology course in the Caribbean. I said “Okay. I’m going to apply”. The National Science Foundation and Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología joined forces and they were able to give three fellowships to three Mexicans in that class. I was one of those Mexican fellows.

That tropical marine biology course happened to be a Cornell University class that was being taught in Mexico. That was the first time I interacted with an American scientist and learned about scientific diving. It was also my first experience with coral reefs as a young scientist. Soon after that, the instructor for that course asked me if I could be his Teaching Assistant the next year in Mexico, and I said yes. Later on he asked me, “Do you want to be my technician when you finish your undergrad?” I replied “Yes”, and I went to be his technician. It was nice because I traveled to different places while working with him. Then I thought, “Okay, I want to do a master’s.”

At the beginning I was not sure whether I wanted to be a scientist. I remember the first time I told my mother she laughed because she thought I was joking. Then she saw me incredibly sad and she asked why I was sad. I replied, “No, I am serious.” She then said, “What do you mean? Like in Jurassic Park?” The closest thing my mom associated with scientists was what she had seen in Jurassic Park. I told her, “No. Well, kind of, but not with old fossils.” After that, she totally supported me. After I finished my job as a technician, I applied for a master’s program. This experience was very intense since I was still learning English. I remember going back to Mexico (after my MS) and saying “Enough of the gringos”. However, after a while I start missing science and the joy to ask questions, explore, perform experiments and discover. Later, I was accepted into a PhD program in Hawaii.

After my postdoc at University of California in Santa Barbara, I started teaching as an assistant professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills, where 81% of the students in the department were first-generation or under-represented minorities. I was there for two years and really enjoyed the opportunity to work with a diverse community. However, the teaching and service commitments were extensive and there was not
a lot of time or support for research activities and that is why I decided to move to another institution. At the University of Washington I have found a nice balance between research, teaching and education..

*That is a great path to follow. Now, if you look back on that path, it was not always easy. There were bumps in the road, there were obstacles. When you reflect, what are the kinds of things that best help you overcome obstacles?*

The first obstacle was within Mexico. Down in Mexico, you generally stay nearby when you go to college. To have my mom let me go even though all my aunts told her she should not let me go was a challenge. But my mom allowed me to leave. To be brave and to show people what you really want. I think that helps to gain support.

During my Master’s I remember that gaining the language and coping with graduate school demands was hard. In grad school everything is fast! Another challenge was to learn how to generate ideas. In Mexico, I was rarely asked, “What is your idea? or What project do you want to develop? Thus, at the beginning of my graduate program I was not very confident with developing ideas, but being patient with myself led to confidence. Now I have too many ideas!

“I think it is important to be brave because, in many cases, you will be the only person doing things. I think you need to be patient and extremely focused because if you just start looking at all the challenges that are around you, it’s easy to get overwhelmed.”

Another big challenge was when I became pregnant. I remember finishing my postdoc and then being pregnant with my first child and no job. I was thinking, “Oh my gosh! What am I going to do?” My husband, who is also Mexican, was working but we lived in San Francisco, so we could not make enough for us to have the baby in childcare. That was really difficult and I thought that I would have to end my career because I must stay with the baby. But I reached out for help. I told some of my previous mentors “I know there are a few things that you’re finishing in your lab, and I know how to do them. Would you pay me just partially?” I think that was huge because it helped me to not lose momentum and continue with my research..

*What is hard about asking for help?*
I think it is hard because sometimes you think people might not understand, or might not want to support you.

*And yet, asking for help is something that helped you overcome many of those barriers.*

Just in that aspect. I think it is also important to be creative. Sometimes the best path of action is not the most obvious choice. For example, my husband and I lived in two different cities (San Francisco and Los Angeles) when I got my job as an assistant professor at CSUDH. The obvious choice was “Stay in San Francisco do not leave your husband. What are you thinking? You have a one-year old baby. Why would you do that?” But we talked a lot about it and we decided that it was good for the team that I would go to Los Angeles and continue my career. So, for two years I would only see him 2-3 days a week. But having that job allowed me to continue my academic career and then get my position at UW and now we are both in Seattle with 2 kids!

*Thank you. The reason why I asked more about asking for help is that it is something I know can be hard, and I have heard other people talk about it too. It is not to single you out on it, but I just wanted to dig a bit deeper and get your perspective on that.*

*Moving on, if you were invited to give the graduation speech to a high school that was in a place with many Latinos, many first-generation high school graduates, what would you tell them? How do you encourage them to keep on thinking about higher education? What would be your message to them?*

I think it is important to be brave because, in many cases, you will be the only person doing things. I think you need to be patient and extremely focused because if you just start looking at all the challenges that are around you, it’s easy to get overwhelmed. Sometimes I do not even realize that there were challenges around me, and that is because I was focused on my goals.

Focus will also help them to stay on track and not give importance to comments undermining their efforts such as: “Oh yeah, you are there because they had to hire someone”, “Of course they are going to give it to you. You are the only Mexican in the College of Environment.”
I think it is important to believe in yourself, otherwise, those comments can take you to a place you should not be. You should be confident that you deserve to be where you are. Stay focused!!
I would tell them; really do what you want. That is so important. Do what you want, even if it sounds crazy. If you are happy doing what you do, and you work hard, this will bring you a lot of rewards and happiness.

So, let us get back to the object that you had, your mask that you pulled out there. I like to have an object that you can talk about. Tell me more about this mask that I saw briefly.

It is a mask with a snorkel. This is basically the only gear I had when I went to the ocean when I was young in Mexico. I didn’t know I wanted to be a scientist, but I knew that I wanted to learn more about the ocean and be in the ocean. Science is what has brought me to the United States. The ocean is what has brought me to everything, even my husband. We both met studying oceanography in Mexico. The ocean has also brought me here, to really take science to another level. That ocean has also led me back to Mexico to have collaborations. So, through the ocean is how I have this route. The ocean is important to me and it is important for me to be a part of it.
What are you being recognized for this year?

It is for a research grant that I got from the Alzheimer’s Association to study a program for Latino family caregivers of people with dementia. The program teaches the caregiver how to manage the psychological and behavioral symptoms of dementia, which can be very challenging. The program has been tested in research studies and demonstrated to be efficacious. But it’s been tested mainly with white populations of caregivers. I’m going to be working on the cultural adaptation of the program to increase its relevance for Latino families and also studying whether we can use technology to deliver the intervention.

That’s excellent! I remember when the award was announced for this and they were very happy for you. So, tell me, how does a Latina woman like you end up on the faculty at the University of Washington? What path brought you here?

I’m from the Yakima Valley. I grew up in Sunnyside, and I was an undergraduate student here at UW. During my undergraduate studies, I fell in love with the education and research environment at UW. I did undergraduate research throughout my time at UW, and at that point, I set a goal for myself to one day become a professor at UW. I did everything that I possibly could to make that dream come true. It took me many, many years, but I was able to achieve that goal that I set very early on in my college career.

Oh, that’s kind of unusual. From most of the stories I’m hearing, it’s more of a meandering path. And you set out a goal: “That is what I want to do” and
then went to accomplish it!

When I was about nineteen years old at UW, I loved the academic environment. I loved doing research, and I thought, “I want to do this for a living. So, what do I need to do to get there?” I wanted to be a professor at UW, nowhere else. I had help from my own professors when I asked them: “What do I need to do if I want to be a professor at UW? What do I need to do to make that happen?”

In that path that you set for yourself since you were nineteen, you encountered many obstacles and roadblocks. What helped you overcome obstacles? What is something that helps you get over humps on the road?

I would say for me there were two things. The ability to focus and to continue to work hard in the midst of challenging situations.

Continuing to work hard, no matter what obstacle I encountered. There were many challenges in graduate school, when I was in my PhD program and training to be a researcher. But also, there were times when I was going through a really hard time in my personal life. However, when I would sit down to work on my dissertation or work on manuscripts, I would leave all of that behind. I would focus and continue to work really hard at my goal.

Wow, that’s great! Now, imagine that you were invited to go back to Sunnyside High School to give a graduation speech. It has to be short and inspirational, and you know the kind of students that are graduating from Sunnyside in the Yakima Valley. What do you tell them? What is your message for them?

I’m a first-generation American and first-generation college student. I grew up in a low-income family, and it was easy to get into the trap of thinking, “I need to graduate from high school and take a job here in Sunnyside and start making money right away to help my parents.”
But, I would say that for me it was really important to focus on the long-term and think, “Yes, I’m going to be in college for a number of years, and I probably won’t be able to help my parents for a while. But after that, I will have earned a college degree and will have a higher-paying job that will allow me to help my parents more.”

I would advise high school students considering attending college to think about the long term. Attending college will require sacrifices, but the investment that you’re making by going to college will most likely pay off in the long-term.

*So, if I can paraphrase from your last two comments: stay focused and think long term.*

Exactly! Yes.

*So, tell me about this picture that you sent me. What’s going on here?*

I was a freshman or sophomore at UW, and I was working on a calculus problem, from what I could tell by what is written on the whiteboard. I really like that picture because it goes back to what I told you earlier, my path to becoming a professor.

When I was growing up, education wasn’t really emphasized in my family. I didn’t realize until I started my undergraduate degree how much I loved learning and being in an academic environment.

During my undergraduate studies, I was part of the minority scholars engineering program at the UW College of Engineering. That picture only shows me, but there is a group of about fifteen students, and we’re all standing up by the whiteboards working on math problems. We are minority students, first-generation American or first-generation college students. Being in that supportive environment really helped me to flourish and to learn that if I work really hard at something, I can be really good at that thing. I didn’t know I had that potential until the program helped bring it out in me. That picture kind of captures it.

Around the time the picture was taken is when I first started to think about pursuing a PhD. One of my mentors in the program, Dave Prince,
said to me one day, “Hey, you should think about getting a PhD. You’re really focused; you’re really good at this.” I responded, “What’s a PhD?” As I thought about it more and more, it made sense because I wanted to always continue learning, be around students, and be a role model for students with similar backgrounds as me.

*It is beautiful because on first look, you could think, “Oh, it’s a young woman alone in front of a whiteboard trying to solve an equation.” But what I’m hearing you say is that it’s a woman, supported by a whole group of people realizing her inside potential, discovering what she can accomplish in life.*

Exactly, you summarized it better than me.

*So that makes it even a more beautiful picture. Thank you for sharing it with us.*
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. Why don’t you tell us a bit about what it is that you do, and why you are being honored and recognized this year in the Latinx Recognition?

I’m a counseling psychologist. I completed my doctorate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in counseling psychology. I do a lot of what clinical psychologists do. We are trained to do interventions and work with communities, but our philosophical underpinnings are a little bit more geared towards how to think multiculturally about what it means to do the type of psychotherapeutic work that we do. And it’s also kind of social justice oriented. So, how do we advocate and do the work that we do as psychologists in a way that we’re trying to minimize the effects or impacts of social inequities and, when we can, to develop interventions and policies that help mitigate, or even sometimes tear some of those inequities down?

I’m kind of new faculty to the field. This is my first faculty job that I was very excited to get. Some of my work is really focused on, particularly with Latinx populations, how do we culturally adapt or develop our own interventions that make sense for how Latinos think about their mental health, their well-being. This article is particularly a framework. That’s why it’s a postcolonial lens–how do we think critically about how psychotherapy in general has been developed from Western-based notions of what it means to be healthy; what mental health means in general for us; how do we deconstruct some of that so that we’re challenging some of those assumptions, so we’re developing interventions that make sense for folks from a lot of different, diverse backgrounds—not only Latinos,
but any racial and ethnic minority—but also thinking about culture in general. All the identities that we bring into the room, as psychologists, not only our race or ethnicity, but our gender or sexual orientation or socioeconomic background, where we come from, the languages that we speak—all of that interacts with our patients. So this article is particularly thinking about how we can develop supervision experiences for clinicians-in-training.

When I’m supervising clinicians-in-training, I want them to be able to challenge some of those Western-based notions of psychotherapy and then do things differently that make sense to the patient’s background. One example that we gave is, for example, who says that we have to give psychotherapy sitting in chairs facing each other. Sometimes it’s more culturally congruent to sit on the floor, given our own patients’ backgrounds. These are specific things that we think about how to do, but it’s sometimes hard to have our trainees challenge some of these Western-based conceptions, because that’s the way that we’re trained to think. And so we really center on developing a really strong relationship between the person who is supervising—in that case, it could be me, supervising that clinician—so that I’m inviting them to challenge some of those and come up with different solutions for their patients. Then they’re able to use our relationship as a model to develop that strong therapeutic relationship with their patient, where they’re inviting their patient to also think about their mental illness or emotional distress as also influenced by these cultural factors and our social identities as well.

Tell me a bit more about how you got here. How does a Latina like you end up at the University of Washington?

I really believe in life force, and I think the life force brought me here in some ways. Growing up in Mexico, I grew up very Catholic, but my parents were also really into more New Age and Indigenous belief systems. My household was kind of like an interesting mixture of a lot of different philosophies of life. So, I don’t necessarily call it God or anything else, I call it the life force. In some ways, I think all of us are spiritually and energetically interconnected and sometimes things just happen, or are facilitated through some of that energy as well. I moved to the Pacific Northwest from Wisconsin once I finished my doctoral training there. The final year of our training is a full year of clinical work, and so I was matched at Pacific Psychology and Comprehensive Health Clinics in
Portland and Hillsboro, Oregon, for my doctoral internship to provide psychotherapy to mostly Latinx, mostly recently migrated populations who were Spanish-speaking in the Oregon area, and then to also provide supervision for clinicians-in-training, who were also bilingual and Spanish-speaking. So I was in their track, hopefully developing some knowledge, but definitely integrating and doing some of the work that is really needed, particularly for bilingual psychologists. There are so few of us, and having these specific training opportunities in Spanish are really, really needed.

That’s the first thing that brought me to the Pacific Northwest, and then obviously when I went on the job market, I interviewed in a lot of places. Being so close to Tacoma, when this job opportunity came up, it seemed like a good opportunity and an easy place to go interview. I came to interview in the winter of 2018-19, so it was in between those two or three weeks that we had snow storms. I had to go from Portland to Tacoma and I was flown three times to finish my interview. The first time I remember being in Tacoma, I had gotten there the night before and it was going to be a Monday that I was going to do my first interview. I was walking around campus and it had just started snowing, so a lot of it was covered in snow and it looked beautiful. I remember thinking and feeling like, wow, a sense of belonging. Like, “This feels like a place I could actually see myself in.” Tacoma was actually the last place that I interviewed at. In some parts I thought, “Oh, should I be interviewing?” because of all the weather issues, but then I met the potential colleagues that I would have and it’s such a diverse group of colleagues too. It’s the Social, Behavioral and Human Sciences Division, and we have psychologists from a whole lot of different backgrounds—we have clinical psychologists, community, social psychologists, cognitive psychologists.

I really felt like, not only could I see myself fitting in with these folks, but I was also excited about potential collaborations. In fact, in my first couple of months at UW Tacoma, one of my colleagues, Dr. Rachel Hershberg, who’s a community psychologist, her and other Latinos in the UWT system we’ve collaborated and gotten a grant to do storytelling-based intervention for Latina teens who have disproportionately high rates of depression in Tacoma. So that was really the thing that ignited my passion. I could see myself here, and I felt really excited about the potential to collaborate with other folks. And then the final thing that I think was the seal for me, was that UWT was really excited about the potential of
starting a master’s program in counseling or some kind of licensure-based applied psychology master’s, and there’s so few in the Washington area and it’s so needed, too. So the potential to develop a program that has some of these philosophical tenets, that is really community-based and really focuses on advocacy and social justice and practicing what we’re preaching as psychologists, seemed really, really exciting to me.

That’s really interesting. A lot of life force energies that brought you here to Tacoma.

I thought so.

Now, that path, and the path leading to that path, going to graduate school and doing your PhD, is not always an easy path. Why don’t you tell me a bit about some of the things that helped you overcome obstacles when they presented themselves in your way? What kind of things helped you get over those?

I would say, and maybe this is true for a lot of Latinos, like myself, family was really important. I moved from my hometown in Mexico—I’m from Cholula, Puebla—to the US for graduate school in 2012, and I was the first in my family to pursue graduate school. Having my family’s support and just their faith that I was going to be OK and do well, was really important. My mom is originally from Wisconsin; English is her first language, and she did up to high school in the US, too. I would send her my essays and be like, “Mom, can you check my English in these essays?” It wasn’t only the porras [encouragement] that I needed, but also some of the practical skills in doing that. When I think of family, I’ve also kind of broadened my perspective of what family can look like. Finding your graduate program where you can build your own family with academic advisors and your peers was really helpful for me. I was incredibly fortunate to be in a counseling psychology program that had a lot of badass Latinos. My advisor was Dr. Steve Quintana, and he has always been so supportive of all my ideas. He has been that cheerleader that gives me the porras, then also that technical support; like, “This is how we figure out how you can do what you want to do.”

I also have two very powerful Latina mentors. Dr. Alberta Gloria, she helped me and my colleague develop a mentoring program for us to pair Latino undergraduates who were interested in going into graduate school
with graduate Latino students who were at UW-Madison. So that was another way of building this larger community of family. And then Dr. Carmen Valdez—I did a lot of my work focused on Latinos and community-based interventions with her. Without having that kind of mentor to guide me in how to actually implement these psychotherapeutic interventions and show me the ropes of the field, I think it would have been a really different experience. I feel like having these faculty advisors and then having peers that I really enjoyed talking to, that challenged some of my ideas, that I could collaborate with as well, was really key to my success. I think for a lot of folks, having a space where we feel like we can belong is really helpful. And in those moments where we’re finding trepidation, or other systemic barriers, or our own kind of individual barriers, having other people that we can rely on and trust to talk through that, and that are going to be our cheerleaders, is so helpful. And that’s also something that I really loved about UWT. We’re a minority majority campus, so our students get to have faculty who look like them, who come from similar backgrounds to them, who can talk the talk and walk the walk, who know what it’s like to sometimes have the struggle, but to also succeed. And we’re really, I think, invested in that success, too.

I feel so fortunate that I’ve found that community of other Latino faculty at UWT as well. And I think that’s what allowed us to develop this intervention. Our intervention is called ALAS: Adolescent Latinas Advancing Salud mental through Storytelling. It’s a storytelling-based group focused on mental health and we’re doing this with Dr. Ariana Camacho, Dr. De La Cruz, and Dr. Chavez, and then also Dr. Hershberg, who’s the only non-Latina there, but knows how to hang with us because she’s done a lot of community-based research with Latinos. Unfortunately, right now it’s on hold, because everything is on hold in life, but it’s an exciting place to be. And finding that belonging and the folks that you can jive with and collaborate with, who continue to give you that energy, is what I think continues that life force and that kind of energetic reciprocity.

Now that you are on the faculty at the University of Washington Tacoma, how do you model being the mentor you needed when you were making your way through graduate school and through everything that you’re in? How are you the mentor that is the mentor you needed?

Yeah, I think, a really key aspect of that is providing access. So one of the first things that I did when I started here at UWT, was to start a research
team. I gave a talk, gave my information, students started contacting me, and I was like, “OK, let’s form a group.” A lot of students don’t start research because they feel unfamiliar with it. Sometimes they feel intimidated by doing it. I think the best way of learning, and learning whether or not you want to pursue graduate school, is sometimes by doing. So, I think having this space of a research lab—I started a Latinx Mental Health Research Lab—allowed my students, hopefully, to kind of start igniting some of their interests about talking about what is happening in our local community; where do you search for literature that makes sense about what we’re talking about; how do we develop interventions or even pamphlets, fliers, or something that makes sense to how to respond to the community’s mental health care needs. But it’s also a space where at the beginning, I’m always very intentional about checking in: “How are you doing as a person? What is stressing you out right now? How’s your family?”

When my students need an individual meeting, let’s talk about what are other things that are going on in your life that may be getting in the way of what you need to be doing, and normalizing some of the experiences and the emotions that come up wherever they are in their process. A lot of my students were applying for graduate school. I was hounding them about that personal statement—you send me that personal statement. “I know it’s very vulnerable, I know you’re going to put it off, and so let’s set a time and I’m going to be emailing you otherwise. Let’s get this done.” I found that the students that I have encountered at UWT are really engaged in their learning. It really doesn’t take that much hounding; they’re very self motivated. Perhaps it’s because they have experienced a lot more stressors than your average college student, but they’re very resilient. And they’re very invested in doing the work to try to continue on their path, whatever that looks like. I often see myself as, like, “How can I facilitate that path?” And when there are things that come up, to notice that, and to be asking directly about it. If I don’t ask them, they’re not going to tell me, as a faculty.

Let’s turn the clock back a bit more and think about high school graduates.

“Education will open the doors. You could lose everything, but you will never lose that title, that degree that you have in your hand. No one can take that away, ever, no matter what happens.”
Suppose you’re invited to give the graduation speech to a high school where there are a lot of first generation students, a lot of Latinx students. What can you tell them when they’re curious about whether they should pursue higher education, or go to community college, or go to the UW, or UW Tacoma?

You know, I always think about something that I used to be told when I was a high school student and considering going to college and that application process. Something that people would often say is, “El título nadie te lo quita” (“the title, no one can take away”). That’s so real about education and I think why our parents have worked so hard to get us education, you know. My dad had up to a sixth-grade education, whatever that meant, he didn’t get beyond that. He was a very curious man. Both my parents did a lot of work to get us to a point where we could apply for college and pursue a higher education, because they had that belief that no matter what happens in your life, you’re going to face adversity.

Education will open the doors. You could lose everything, but you will never lose that title, that degree that you have in your hand. No one can take that away, ever, no matter what happens. For me, I feel like that would be an important message for them, and also that it’s never a linear trajectory, or it’s not necessarily a linear trajectory. Particularly when we do have to overcome a lot of systemic barriers. When I was applying for college, I had lost my dad. He died when I was sixteen. I had a tumor in my thyroid when I was seventeen. And my sister—I have a twin sister—right after we had applied to college, she had a very severe allergic reaction and was hospitalized with a life-threatening disease. I didn’t know if I was going to make it to college, and my twin sister definitely did not know if she was going to make it to college, but we persevered. I think that’s the key thing about Latinos, is that we come from a culture of survival, and perseverance, and resilience.

A lot of the work that I talk about is related to the history of colonization and how, in some ways, a lot of the psychotherapy practices that we do, reflect some of our own history of colonization. We take these Western-based conceptions of mental health and try to put them in practice across the globe, not only with Latinos. But definitely, that was the way that I was trained as a psychologist in Mexico. I did my undergraduate back home. I think that despite that colonization process, as a culture we have survived. A lot of our Indigenous practices, and beliefs, and customs may look a little bit different, but they’re still there. Our cosmogony, the
way that we look at the world and our worldviews, my belief about the life force, all of that is still there. I think that what I would say to Latino high-schoolers is, “We are survivors, and we can do it.” Part of that doing, I think, is finding a place where you can thrive and belong, and doing the things that you’re most passionate about, because in those moments of faults and difficulty and challenge, we can always rely on that passion to get us through, some of that resilience. When we can’t do that, we can fall back on the folks that have allowed some of that space of belonging and support to get us through. Recognizing that life happens, and sometimes it’s not going to be linear, but we can always regroup and redirect our own paths as well. I think part of that resiliency is being able to connect to our own self-determination. What do I want to do with my life, regardless of the things that have happened.

Excellent, thank you. Rather than staying on the scenario with the students, let’s switch over to this object that you sent me a picture of—thank you for sending it in advance. What is this object?

I have it here. In this form, it’s a keychain, which my grandfather found a couple of years ago. We didn’t know that we had this keychain. I’ve said before, I’m from Cholula, Puebla. If you look up Cholula, when the colonizers came to central Mexico, the colonizers, or the Spanish, disembarked in Veracruz. Then they made their way through Puebla, to Mexico City. Puebla, at the time, what was there was Cholula. It was a big commercial center for a lot of different cultures of Mesoamerica at the time. We still, now, have the biggest pyramid by base in the world. When the Spanish came, they put a bunch of dirt and then a church on top of it. Right now, what you can see is a little bit of the pyramid, but mostly that church.

I’ve been there. I’ve been horrified by it. So, yes, I know what you’re talking about.

Yeah. So my dad, who was from Cholula, found a piece of ceramic from the pyramid when he was a young person. And so the original of this keychain is actually a ceramic. I don’t know where it is
now, because when he died, obviously a lot of things were jumbled. I don’t know if anyone else knows where this particular piece of ceramic is, but he had made it into the stamp that he used for our store. My parents owned a store in the marketplace that started out as kind of like an abarrotes, a convenience store, and then later shifted into being a hardware store. So that was the logo that he had for the store. The store was called Alyssxandra, which was the amalgamation of Alyssa, which is my name, and my sister’s name, Alexandra, so it was kind for both of the twins. When it was my dad’s tenth-year death anniversary, my sister and I actually tattooed this image on our backs in commemoration for him, but also commemoration to all the things that this store gave us. My dad worked really hard. He migrated to the US multiple times to make enough money so that he could save it up to buy this marketplace store.

My parents tended to the store and really, ultimately, it was that work that allowed us to be able to access higher education. It gave us access to private school. When we were in private school, my mom was also a teacher in that school, so we could get a scholarship for that too. I also go back to this image, because it’s also an image of cultural resilience for us as a family, and for us as a people in Cholula.

When I went to undergrad in Mexico, I was reading all these theories from the US, mostly, and Europe, and then going out and practicing with folks, trying to tell them what the cognitive behavioral therapy model was for their anxiety, and they’d be like, “No, Alyssa, this is not how I feel about my anxiety.” Continuing to go back to my roots has been what has given me the passion and the drive to wanting to be a faculty member, to wanting to continue to develop knowledge that comes from our own indigenous systems and ways of being and thinking about the world. I think often we’re trained from these Western-based conceptions, but we don’t necessarily focus on our own Indigenous beliefs and practices, and that needs to happen more, because that will be congruent to the lived realities and experiences of a diversity of people. Not only the tiny percent that that was developed for. I’m the first psychologist in my family, and I often think about how my approach would make sense if I was working with my family. To my own family’s mental and emotional experiences. I also believe that psychotherapists’ main tool in our work is ourselves, so we need to focus on the cultures that we bring into that clinical encounter with our patients a lot more than we do now.
Thank you. That’s very beautiful, very moving. You showed me the keychain object, but you mentioned you and your sister also did it on your shoulder. There are other people who have shared with me tattoos, and so I thought it’d be beautiful, if you’re willing to, share a picture of your tattoo.

Yeah.

Why would you put this on your body, on your skin? Why would you have this on your body?

The main tattoo is what I sent you. And then, my sister added gardenias on the top and on the sides, which symbolize my mom, my sister, and I. So it’s, in some ways, like a family coat of arms. It felt symbolic to do something permanent on our body, in some ways to commemorate our relationship, not only to our family, but also to our father, and that’s why we decided to do it on the ten-year death anniversary. We went back and forth about a lot of things that we would like to do for that, and that’s what we decided to do. Now, it’s kind of become a thing. Both my sister and I now also have a tattoo of a hummingbird that commemorates my sister’s eleven-year-old daughter, so we both have one for my niece Sam. I think we’ve decided that tattoos commemorate really important people or moments in our lives.
I’m a molecular biologist and a cancer researcher and I’m originally from Spain. I came to the USA in 2001 to do a postdoctorate and to improve my English, which was pretty much non-existent at the time. I could read and write relatively well but I could barely follow a conversation. I was fortunate to find very nice people that were extremely patient with me and little by little my communication skills improved. At the same time my research evolved and I ended up at the University of Washington for a second postdoc. The focus of my research has always been cancer genetics with a special angle on method development. At UW, I have been able to work on new methods that help us understand the alterations that lead to cancer. Our ultimate goal is to understand how cancer originates so that we can develop better strategies for early cancer detection, prevention and prediction.

What do you like about the work you do? What makes you proud?

I love everything I do! Being a scientist is a privilege. It is hard and challenging at times, but also extremely exciting and rewarding. As scientists,
we can see things that no one has seen before and, for me, the joy of discovery justifies all the hard efforts. In addition, the research that we do could eventually help patients and save lives. No one should die of cancer and this motivation keeps me going every day.

Regarding to what makes me proud: every achievement, big and small. Articles and grants, of course, but also students that learn and enjoy the opportunity to do research, experiments that work after rounds of failing, and presentations that are well received and leave the audience excited and interested. I also feel very proud of being where I am, against all odds. If 20 years ago someone would have told me that I’d end up having a cancer research lab at UW, I would not have believed it. Not speaking English, not knowing the system, being not only first generation college, but first generation everything, and with many hurdles in the way. But my family back in Spain showed me the value of education, hard work and perseverance, and the importance of doing things that can make the world a better place. I’m grateful for the opportunity to do that at UW!

“I love everything I do! Being a scientist is a privilege. It is hard and challenging at times, but also extremely exciting and rewarding.”
What is the work that you do to be recognized this year? What is the work you’re most proud of?

There are two pieces that have come out this academic year that may have been picked up by colleagues.

One traces the institutional genealogy of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency). It traces it to the Office of Civil Defense as an office of the Cold War. This piece emerges out of FEMA’s failures while working in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. That got me thinking about, “What is it that we want FEMA to do? What is FEMA intended to do?” That’s when I started looking at the institutional logic of FEMA and how it emerged out of civil defense and fears of nuclear war. This is a collaborative effort, with a large forum of historians responding to Hurricane Maria and colonialism in Puerto Rico. We are looking at what are some of the historical challenges that Hurricane Maria brought to the fore, in terms of the colonial regime under the United States.

The second piece, NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America), is about human rights research done here at the university and the challenges they face to push it forward. This is a collaboration effort with two other amazing colleagues. None of them are historians nor within the same discipline. They are Yolanda Valencia, a geographer who works on the border, and Tony Lucero, a political scientist who does South American indigenous politics.

Excellent. Thank you. How does a Latina woman like you end up and the faculty at the UW? What is your path that brings you here?
That’s a long story. I never intended to be in the United States in my entire life. I wanted to do a PhD in history, but I didn’t want to come to the Metropole. But there were not many choices when I was an undergraduate student at the Universidad de Puerto Rico. There, I had the chance to meet a professor from the history department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. At that time, I thought I could do what was then called “anti-colonial work.” I learned through them that there was something about being in the belly of the beast and doing this kind of work.

I was able to come across some funding to survive the first year and I said, “Let me just go and figure this out.”

It was a horrendous experience, but I survived it. I ended up staying and finishing the PhD at the University of Wisconsin. Then, I went on the job market and I had a few options. But I had fictive kin (the make-up families that we create when we are immigrants) who were living in Washington already, and who had been crucial people to me as I was in Wisconsin. So, when the position came up at the University of Washington, it made better sense to move there with my husband. It was a great university, in a city with people that I knew already. I was actually very afraid of moving again. Moving out of Puerto Rico was probably one of the most traumatic experiences for me. To have to do it again and even farther was challenging. But I ended up saying, “Okay, let’s go”. It was the best decision I could have ever made, and here I am.

**In that long path that brings you from back home in Puerto Rico to here, what has helped you overcome obstacles?**

I think other women of color that have undergone similar experiences, with whom you can share and commiserate with, but more importantly, who can mentor you and strategize with you. People with whom you can both cry and laugh with, but also who can help you do what you need to do. Those kinds of friendships. I have been very lucky to find key people who have been crucial in this journey, and I have been crucial to them, too. I have had multiple two-way relationships like that. Without them, I definitely don’t think that I would have been able to work.

**Imagine you had the opportunity to go back to Puerto Rico and speak to the high school graduates of this year. What do you tell them? What is your message for them?**
Fight. You need to fight. You need to read. Don’t believe what you’re being told by one single source, you have to read widely. Talk to other people and organize. Action doesn’t have to be big action. Action can be very small actions. It could be driving somebody, or it could be picking up the phone for something, or it could be five bucks in the corner. Those actions accumulate in the end. For Puerto Ricans today on the island, that message will resonate because we are in a moment at which we’re fighting. We just need to hear that it will lead us somewhere. I believe that it will lead us somewhere, definitely.

I’m picking up three words: fight, read and organize.

Yes, yes, organize every day. We think that things need to be enormous, and that’s fantastic if you can do that, but it doesn’t have to be. We can think in small steps that accrue through time. I think that things will mount up to something big.

If you were to imagine an image, a picture, a drawing, a sculpture, or some sort of visual that you felt represented some of your trajectory in your work as a Latina in the faculty, what would that be?

Una mata de guineo [a banana bush]. You know what I learned about a mata de guineo? If it falls, you can rebuild it. You can stand them up and they will flourish and produce bananas again.

I didn’t know that, until the hurricane. I was traumatized by the lack of access to our green plantains because after the hurricane I just wanted to taste my Mom and I couldn’t. I was desperate to find green plantains, which I cannot find here. When I told the story to my brother, who lives in a rural area, he told me about the banana trees that were on the floor and I started sobbing. He asked, “Why are you sobbing? Don’t worry. The good thing about the banana trees is that we can replant them immediately and they can flourish again. That’s the last thing that you need to worry about. They grow so fast.” It’s not only the potential of regeneration, but also the fact that they grow so quickly. I went home three months after
the hurricane, and there was already little mata de platano growing in the back of my mom’s house.

It’s been 27 years in the U.S. and it’s been a struggle every single day, but I’m still here. Like a little *mata de guineo*. 
Tell me about the work you are being recognized for this year. Can you describe it in plain language, in a way that my grandmother would understand?

This year I am very appreciative of being recognized for two things: a major grant and publications. This academic year I was lucky enough to be awarded a collaborative four-year NSF grant ($766,000) with Dr. Jennifer Stone from the UW Bloedel Hearing Research Center to investigate “Cell Signaling Regulation of Hormonally Mediated Auditory Plasticity.” As part of this grant, we will examine how estrogen regulates cellular and molecular changes in hearing sensitivity of the vocal plainfin midshipman fish. My previous research showed that female midshipman fish undergo seasonal increases in estrogen that enhance their hearing sensitivity to the vocalizations they produce during social and reproductive behaviors. We use the midshipman as an animal model to gain insight into the mechanisms of how hormones may affect hearing sensitivity in all animals, including humans.

In addition to the grant, I was fortunate to publish ten papers related to my research. I am especially proud of the co-authored paper that was published in Current Biology, which shows that the neurohormone dopamine is released by the midshipman brain and the amount of dopamine release is controlled seasonally to enhance the hearing sensitivity of females to better detect the “mate calls” that males produce seasonally.
to attract females for mating. This is potentially a new mechanism that can affect hearing sensitivity in all animals.

The other paper that I am excited about is titled “Sexually Dimorphic Swim Bladder Extensions Enhance the Auditory Sensitivity of Female Plainfin Midshipman Fish, Porichthys Notatus.” This paper was published in the *Journal of Experimental Biology*, and in it we show that the female midshipman has evolved a different morphology or shape of their swim bladder (compared to males) that essentially acts as a crude ear drum that improves their sense of hearing to detect males.

*How did you end up at UW? What is the path that brought you here?*

It was a long academic journey before I ended up at my dream job at the University of Washington. I grew up in a middle-class family in Southern California, near Long Beach, and was interested in oceanography and biology ever since I was in middle school. After I graduated from public high school, I went to Cal State University Long Beach (CSULB) because it was a local university close to where I lived, and it offered a degree in marine biology. I didn’t think I could get into UC Santa Barbara’s marine biology program (one of the best) so I quickly settled on a degree at CSULB and besides I thought the tuition would be too expensive at UCSB, and my dad went to CSULB, where he majored in physical education. None of my other relatives at the time had gone on to a four-year university, so I didn’t have high expectations for myself. I was fortunate that my parents were able to help me pay my tuition at CSULB, which was very reasonable at the time, and they never pressured me to choose a specific major. They allowed me to pursue my interests.

By the time I was in my third year as a marine biology major at CSULB, I decided that I wanted to be either a high school biology teacher or a fisheries biologist after taking an ichthyology (biology of fishes) class, but then I took my first animal behavior class and I was hooked. I asked my animal behavior professor (Dr. Donald Nelson), who worked on sharks, if I could get involved in some lab research, and he offered me the opportunity to work with one of his grad students to develop a project. I chose a project that involved documenting the growth and development of juvenile swell sharks that Nelson had in the department’s marine lab. I really enjoyed working in the Nelson lab and got to meet and work with all the grad students in the lab. During my senior year something happened
that would later change the course of my academic career. My previous ichthyology professor signed me up for the Minority Access to Research
Careers (MARC) program during my last semester of my senior year. I had no idea what the MARC program was about, but my professor told me that I was joining! I felt I had nothing to lose and the program would help pay my tuition. I later found out that being in the MARC program as an undergrad made me eligible later to apply for a MARC pre-doctoral fellowship (the furthest thing from my mind at the time).

By the time I was ready to graduate, Dr. Nelson offered me a position in his lab as a grad student if I wanted to pursue a master’s degree (CSULB does not have a PhD program, only a master’s program). It was a big decision but I thought I didn’t have anything to lose in getting a master’s degree. I figured I could still pursue a career as a high school biology teacher or fisheries biologist with a graduate degree so I accepted Nelson’s offer. It was an exciting time to be in Nelson’s shark lab in the late 1980s working with his other grad students. One grad student (Rocky Strong) would later go to make documentaries on great white sharks and other sharks films featured on Discovery Channel’s *Shark Week*, and he would also go on to work with underwater sea explorer Jacques Cousteau (who I admired very much as a kid), and another grad student (Chris Lowe) in the lab would later become a professor and an international shark expert who would later replace Don Nelson at CSULB, inherit the shark lab, and teach animal behavior after Nelson passed away (I am still really good friends with Chris today). In addition, I was part of the lab expedition that tracked a rare megamouth shark off the coast of California for four days on Nelson’s research vessel (and even got to meet John Wayne’s son Ethan Wayne who helped out). As a master’s grad student, I worked testing surfactants (detergents) as chemical shark repellents. Nelson had been funded by the US Navy for many years trying to develop an effective chemical shark repellent to be used by Navy sailors and pilots. All these experiences got me more and more interested in science.

During my time in the Nelson lab, I also met a former Nelson student (Tim Tricas) who was a postdoc at Washington University in St. Louis. Tim was planning a trip down to Mexico to a remote area near Bahia Kino on the main land across from Tiburon Island to study mating stingrays. Tim wanted to test the idea that male stingrays were using their ability to detect the weak bioelectric fields of females to locate buried mates during the breeding season. I quickly volunteered to go, and I think Tim
let me go because I had a truck and could transport equipment to the field site! My trips to Mexico with Tim were some of the best times that I have had as a scientist and during my second trip to Mexico, Tim mentioned to me that he was applying for an assistant professor position at a small engineering school in Melbourne, Florida, that also had a decent marine biology program—Florida Institute of Technology. He asked me if I wanted to become his PhD student if he got the position and that he would teach me how to record from electroosensory neurons in stingrays in order to determine the sensitivity of stingray’s electroosensory system. I was definitely interested and began to dream about pursuing a PhD. By the end of that trip, we sketched out a rough plan and I told him I would look into fellowships that could support me as a PhD student.

Long story short, Tim got the job as an assistant professor at Florida Tech and I applied for a MARC pre-doctoral NIH fellowship to work on electro-reception in stingrays and got it! Tim Tricas became a great mentor and friend who taught me how to become a better scientist and think critically about science. I spent five years in Florida training in Tim’s lab to become a neuroethologist (someone who studies the neural basis of behavior). Tim also encouraged me to pursue bigger dreams, which allowed me to set my sites on applying for postdoc positions after graduating with my PhD. I would have never dreamed that I would receive a PhD and become a neuroscientist! I applied for a postdoc position on the NIH sponsored neuroethology training grant in the Department of Neurobiology and Behavior at Cornell University to work with Dr. Andrew “Andy” Bass. Andy Bass studies acoustic communication in fishes including the plainfin midshipman fish, which is primarily found on the West Coast of the United States. I spent five years in Andy’s lab traveling in the summers and winters to the UC Bodega Marine Lab in Bodega Bay, California, to collect midshipman fish to investigate how hormones such estrogen and testosterone affect the auditory system of the plainfin midshipman to enhance auditory sensitivity to social acoustic communication signals. We showed that estrogen can enhance the female’s auditory sensitivity to better detect the male’s advertisement (mate) call during the breeding season. This research led to a first authored *Science* paper (*Science* is one of the premier science journals). I had a great research experience at Cornell working in Andy Bass’s lab. Andy was also a great mentor who taught me how to become a better writer and hone my scientific skills. He also provided me with the knowledge and training on how to become an independent principal investigator (PI).
During my last year in Andy’s lab, I applied to a number of faculty positions and was fortunate to receive multiple offers for assistant professor positions including the position at the University of Washington. The position at UW was (and still is) a dream job because the university has its own marine lab (Friday Harbor Labs) on San Juan Island and my research animals (plainfin midshipman) are found here locally! I started my position here in the Department of Psychology (Animal Behavior) in 2004 and have been here for sixteen years. I was fortunate to be promoted to associate professor with tenure in 2010 and then to full professor in 2016. A big key to my success has always been my mentors, who paved my way to success. I am still very thankful to the MARC program that gave me “access to a research career” and I continue to help promote diversity in science through various programs at UW. I find the satisfaction now in my ability to mentor students and help pave their roads to success and encourage them to dream bigger.

What helped you overcome some of the obstacles you found on your way to being on the faculty at UW?

“The biggest help in overcoming obstacles on my journey to UW was my mentors. They always gave me encouragement when I needed it most.”

The biggest help in overcoming obstacles on my journey to UW was my mentors. They always gave me encouragement when I needed it most. I always felt that I could ask them for advice from them and not worry about being judged. Even though I am a full professor today, I still frequently talk with them to get needed advice. I think I was fortunate to have good academic advisors who were also my mentors. I think students today need to seek multiple advisors including others that are not their immediate graduate advisors for academic advice.

There are many good mentors out there waiting to give you good advice. You just have to ask.

If you were to speak to a group of first generation Latinx high school seniors who were unsure about going to college or to UW, what would you tell them?

Dream big. Education is a key to big dreams. We need now more than ever diverse perspectives in academia/science and evidence suggests
that diversity increases academic excellence. I always tell students that being successful in college and beyond requires hard work, self-motivation, and a little luck. You can always improve your “luck” by putting yourself in situations where good things and opportunities can happen. This could be by meeting and interacting with graduate students and faculty, getting involved in research at UW, going to seminars, presenting your work at a conference. It is up to you and you can do it, but only if you truly want it. Nobody can want it for you. Sometimes I wonder if I would have ever gone on to graduate school and received a PhD if I had turned down the opportunity to travel to Mexico to work with Tim Tricas. I could have easily argued that I wasn’t going to be paid so why should I go? Opportunities can bring you luck!

Can you share with me an image (picture, drawing, object) that somehow represents your accomplishment as Latinx at UW? Tell me more about this image.

The picture that represents my accomplishment at UW is my lab logo. The logo represents to me my accomplishment at UW and the accumulation of hard work to eventually get my own lab in academia. The picture is of the research animal that I study at UW—the native plainfin midshipman fish.
Dr. Anaid Yerena
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, URBAN STUDIES PROGRAM, UW TACOMA

PUBLICATIONS
» “Strategic Action for Affordable Housing: How Advocacy Organizations Accomplish Policy Change”
» “Public Housing Authorities in the Private Market?”
» “Conversations with Moving to Work Agencies on the Future of Policy Innovation”

Anaid, thank you for being part of this effort to collect stories about successful Latinos and Latinas at UW. Would you like to tell me why are you being recognized? Tell us a bit more about yourself and what you’re being recognized for, in everyday language for everybody to understand.

I’m being recognized for a prolific year with three separate publications.

Which one are you proud of?

I am proud of all of them for different reasons, but I would like to share more about a unique collaboration project, with two other housing scholars at different universities that I had the fortune to work with. This project was all about being in the right place at the right time. We’re all housing scholars, and we were all presenting in the same panel at a conference. The senior scholar came up to me at the end of the panel and said, “You know, the work that you’re doing is the missing piece of the puzzle for our project. Is there some way in which we could work together?”

I was still a PhD student at the time, in my last year, and well, of course, initially it was this really awesome moment of being recognized by a senior scholar, and that the work that I do is useful and connected to other work. So there was this really cool excitement around that. And then at some point I had the foresight, I can’t think of another way to put it, to ask the senior colleague for a follow-up conversation to figure it out, that I was open to helping out. The thing is the senior colleague didn’t necessarily approach it as an invitation to collaborate, but more in the sense of “we really need that dataset, we could use that thing you are presenting as
part of our product.” So rather than just saying, “Sure, I can send it to you, give me your email and I’ll send it to you,” I said, “Can we talk more about it? And I’d love to, you know, it sounds exciting. Let’s talk more about it.” In the meantime, I used this time as an opportunity to talk to some of my mentors and ask, “Is it reasonable for me to go back in this situation and say, I’d love to share with you this information, but more importantly, I would like to be a part of the collaboration in a larger way than that and I would like some form of authorship?” And all of my senior colleagues said “No, it’s not unreasonable, if that’s a commitment you would like to make.” It would be nice for somebody else to have initiated, but it might have just not occurred to the faculty member at that moment.

That’s the way that you self-advocate. If you’re interested in contributing to a project to that extent, then you need to communicate it. And so that’s what I did when I went back, I said, “Of course I’d love to do this, but I’m willing to do more than just share the data with you. I’m willing to contribute to your project.” And so that was the beginning of a three- or four-year collaboration on this very ambitious project, looking at all public housing authorities around the country and their likelihood of moving into a space where they don’t just manage and own public housing or housing subsidies, but they also have a private portfolio. In other words, they own housing stock or housing units that are not subsidized. They do it as a way to support their mission and goal of providing subsidized housing to more people. And so it’s an entrepreneurial way of doing it, since they can’t just rely on the funding and support from the federal or any other level of government.

This project was also an opportunity to work with a different timeline, because senior scholars have very different timelines than junior scholars. There were three of us, the lead author, another PhD student, and me. For the two PhD students this was an opportunity to get to know each other better, and maybe relate with where we were in our careers with each other, and then understanding the senior scholar having to manage many other projects and priorities and pushing the work further before it was good enough to be sent out to review. It was at times hard, but also really nice, a bonding experience that I had with both of my colleagues around this issue of how soon do you send it out. It inspired some reflection in me of what it means to publish with a senior scholar in the field.

It wasn’t just the benefits of cutting-edge work, name recognition, and the
visibility for the research, but it was a much slower process all around, senior scholars balance a lot of other commitments. Once we submitted, it still went through several rounds of review, another lesson to be learned. It didn’t matter how many times we revised and checked the work, it still took several iterations. I think the story behind it is the part of this accomplishment that makes me the most proud.

That is a great story. Those years of the collaboration, until it finally came out published, those were also the years of your ride from being a doctoral student to being on the faculty at the UW. Tell me, how does a Latina woman like you end up on the faculty at the University of Washington?

I ended up here because the School of Urban Studies has a special mix of charismatic and committed leadership, and a level of harmony amongst the faculty that I didn’t know existed. When I was exposed to it during the interview, and then when I was invited to be a part of it, it was like, “Oh, that’s something that is not just going to be a job or a good job. It’s something that I’ll be proud to be a part of and would like to contribute to.” And so that’s how I ended up at this university, because of the people, the type of work that we’re doing, and the philosophy behind the work that we’re doing as scholars. It goes beyond just being researchers and teachers.

That path getting to the UW wasn’t always easy, I’m sure. What helped you overcome hurdles and obstacles along the way? What kinds of things were helpful?

What has been the most helpful have been the people. Sometimes people from within the unit. That harmony that I observed was extended to welcome me and offer sources of support, as someone to reach out to for help or to identify resources available. And then also other people from within the community, and my family. There was another thing that I didn’t mention, it wasn’t the main driver but it definitely played a role in my preference for UW Tacoma as the first place where I practiced as a faculty member, and that was the city. The city seemed like the right size city for someone like me, who is building a life of her own away from family, and thinking of starting a family of her own. And so it wasn’t this very small place, kind of disconnected from everything, because I would have had reservations of feeling isolated. I was doing this by myself, even though I had all of these connections and all of the support,
but I was on my own, for the first time. And it was also not this massive urban environment that could have been overwhelming, where there’s positives and negatives. In the positives, so much to do, so exciting. The downsides, I’ve got to navigate this ridiculously difficult housing market and competitive urban environment. All of which might lead me to then lose focus; I need to get these things done, and I need to learn how to manage all these responsibilities that I now have in my role as a faculty member. And so I think Tacoma, for me, was the right location.

As I described it to my husband, the day I arrived in Tacoma for the interview, before the interview I said, “It’s not too big, not too small.” And he said, “You’re starting to sound like Goldilocks.” And I was like, “Yes, exactly.” That’s how I was describing Tacoma as the place for me. So that has been supportive for me, the feeling that I have a connection to this university, this large and internationally recognized institution, but at the same time I’m in this place where I feel fully supported, and that I feel like I’m a part of it. So I’ve become involved at different levels within the city; I’m involved in the place where I live, beyond just being a professor at the university. That has been another way that I’ve overcome some of the hurdles or barriers. I described this to a PhD student one once, when I’m feeling either overwhelmed or stressed out or any negative feeling here about the type of work that I’m doing as a faculty member and a scholar, I can look towards the type of work that I do as a community advocate and in my community work, and I get energy from that. And vice versa, when things are moving super slow in the work in the community, in community outreach and bringing social justice into the world, I can always go back to the classroom where I have more control over the situation, where I can plan out a syllabus and be a very big part of making that happen. So it’s like they feed off of each other.

That’s excellent. That is very powerful. Now imagine yourself being invited to give a graduation speech to a group of high school graduates, many of whom might be first-generation graduating from high school, and many of them might be considering applying to university and continuing their education. What would you tell them?

I would like not to give the same advice that I’ve heard, so I’m trying not to repeat things that they’ve heard before. I wouldn’t necessarily just encourage people to go into higher education, but I would take more of the approach of what my mom did when it was time for me to transition
out of high school and into something else. That’s the way she posited it: “You are going to transition into something else, and you should just make a decision about what the step is, rather than assume that the path is there for you to just go along with it.” This transition period is also the transition into adulthood, so there’s a lot of things that happen around the same time; they’re happening in concert, so it’s a good time for one to reflect on what would I like my next step to be.

For me, it was not only liberating but also kind of weird to hear from my parents that they aren’t telling me to stay in school, which is more traditional; that’s what you hear from parents, but that made it so that when I chose to go into a university and pursue higher education, it was a commitment to myself. I was committed to it, nobody had asked me to do it. I had chosen to do it. And that made my commitment to what I was doing in the classroom different from the way I’d felt in previous stages of my education, where I was in school because my parents took me to school. My advice would be to think very carefully about what you want to do, because, I don’t have a great phrase to be quoted on to explain this, but I think it’s less about making the perfect decision, because I don’t think there is such a thing, but it’s the decision that you believe in, and so when you go back and think to yourself, “Why did I choose that major?” or “Why did I go into college?” you at least have that justification for yourself. It’s like, “Well, because at the moment that was the best option I had,” or because “I didn’t want to do this other thing.” So that has contributed to my not having many regrets.

So I look back at “Why did I choose architecture?” And it’s because I had these five reasons and that I was in love with that field. And to this day, it’s a good reminder to myself when I consider that I could have been a medical doctor, or that I think I would have been a kickass economist, but I was really in love with architecture. So I can go back to that rationale and I don’t regret not studying economics.

So that would be my advice. It’s related to deciding what you want to do, and then when you’re picking a field, use a similar approach. The one that has been good for me is to ask, “What would you be proud to say you studied?” And I don’t know that we use that one. We talk about things like passion and to pick something you’re passionate about and
all that. And I think there’s nothing wrong with that advice. It’s good advice. But for me, I feel proud when I say that I dedicated five years of my life to train to become an architect and I think that everybody should have that satisfaction, that pleasure of feeling pride in what you chose as your field of study.

You know I like talking about objects that are representative for you, and you got worried that it was going to ask you about some object or image, because we had a similar conversation a few years ago. This time, do you have in mind an object or picture, something that helps you represent your experience as a Latina scholar?

I think I’m better prepared this time because I’m home. I have five or six original pieces of art from this Mexican artist that I know, Margara Dozal, and if it helps I can send you a picture of a couple of them.

*I would love to see them there, if you are on your laptop, and if you can take a picture of it and send it to me, that would be great.*

Her subjects are apples, and the state where my mom is from and where I lived most of my childhood in Mexico is always known for growing apples, similar to Washington state, interestingly enough, but anyway... in all of her paintings there’s an apple. So this is one of them, and there’s another one over here. There’s the apple in the front and then there’s another one over here. There’s a lot of art around my house, mostly from her. I grew up with her, so I know her. She’s a friend of my mom’s, and I interact with her every time I go back and visit Mexico. So I would say her art has been very influential in my life, because it has demystified what an artist is, and it brought it close to home, literally, because I could come and visit and interact with her and her art.

This one here was a wedding gift that she made for my husband and me. I think I might send you a picture of this one. We were having a conversation one day and she said, “I’m starting to explore putting my art into different artifacts and I’m using these bateas [wooden fruit bowls]. Would you like one?” I said, “of course, I’d love one.” So when we were discussing the batea she’s like, “Well, I know you studied architecture and you have these skills, and I know you have an appreciation for art and for my work in particular. What do you want to see?” So I said, “I want to feel like I’m looking into the batea full of fruits, I want to feel like I’m staring into a bowl full of apples.” And she’s like, “Oh, I hadn’t thought of doing that.
I’m going to try that.” And that’s what I got. It looks like the bowl is full of apples. So this is what I’ll make sure to send you a picture of.

Beautiful. I’d love to have that picture. Tell me more about how this batea makes you think of your own trajectory as a Latina in academia at the UW. What is the connection?

The connection goes back to my childhood. The artist, the creator of this work, has been an important part of my life. I’ve sometimes described her as more important than my aunts and uncles. I’ve had a much closer relationship to this individual than I have had to my aunts and uncles, so she’s been a much more permanent and supportive person in my life than my relatives. So that is one place where there’s a lot of value, a very strong connection. She’s been a part of every single milestone in my life. She shares in my successes, and she’s been there for my forming a new family, and she is also a very good friend to my mom, which is also very important to me. I’m not there for my mom, but my mom has this friend that she can talk to. So it’s the support, she’s this major support system for my family. So I think that that’s the connection.

That’s great. And I’m glad that you’re surrounded by her art in your home.
There are many more stories than these.

What is your story?
Dr. Gómez gives a strong voice to Latino faculty at the University of Washington, bringing out our stories and dreams, our hopes and battles. But more importantly, this book reminds us to celebrate our accomplishments, because they are indeed great accomplishments that have beaten roadblocks and won uphill battles. It reminds us that we are the resilient ones.

Andres Barria
Associate Professor
Physiology and Biophysics, University of Washington

This is a collection of stories and conversations with Latinx faculty at the University of Washington, all of whom are being recognized for their accomplishments in 2020. Latinx faculty come from a variety of backgrounds and places of origin, and the descriptions of their paths to academia and the University of Washington offer a kaleidoscope of human experiences, ingenuity, and resilience. I hope this collection of stories will be a source of inspiration and encouragement for others in the Latinx community to aim high, to find mentors and support communities, and to reach for the stars.

Ricardo Gómez
Associate Professor
Information School, University of Washington