



Louisa and her granddaughters

Louisa Cruz-Acosta

CT: This is Louisa Cruz-Acosta, being interviewed by Cecelia Traugh. Okay, Louisa. We're going to talk first about who you are and the personal story of your work. And I'm just going to let you talk and then periodically direct or redirect.

LA: So, who I am. That's always an interesting question, all these different circles I'm in. Who I am now is a 53-year-old Puerto Rican woman, raised both in Brooklyn and Puerto Rico, largely by my mother. I have two sisters. I have an older sister, four years my senior. My father's daughter. And I have a younger sister, seven years my junior. Both parents in that case. I'm a mom. I have a 32-year-old daughter, Lorraine, and I have a 25-year-old son, David. I've been married to the same person for 35 years, David Acosta. We live in Mt. Vernon, New York. We've been there for about 16 or 17 years now, in our own home, which we just renovated, so it's a nice place to live.

I guess when I think about who I am, the first thing that comes to mind is my family background and how I was raised in all these different places. But also, my work quickly pops up for me. So, I'll talk about that and intersperse the two. I am also a teacher, currently of 7, 8, 9, and sometimes 10-year-olds. So 2nd and 3rd grade in traditional school language. I teach at the Muscota New School, which is about 13 years old now. It's a relatively small alternative, progressive-minded elementary school in Washington Heights,

In 2004, the Spencer Foundation in Chicago gave NDSG funds to start up an oral history collection to be housed in its archive at the University of North Dakota's Chester Fritz Library. Made up at this point of taped interviews with fellow conferees in the NDSG circle past and present, the collection is an ongoing effort, first of all to help us recall and honor the various pasts that unite us as a democratic community, and secondly to serve the need every democratic community has for its members to utter their stories--not so as to convey some particular messages but primarily and simply to speak and be heard. For a good 25 years now there has been a depression in the ability of American society, as our colleague, the late Lillian Weber, once so aptly put it, to help schoolteachers visualize possibility: *We have a depression in our visualization of possibility right now and I'm saying that it's both the task and the challenge to keep alive the visions that do exist, even if you can't use them right away.* By locating our members' actual experiences in a textured historical 'telling,' we are trying here to bring forward and share a ratifying sense of movement, process, and direction that Weber's remarks alluded to. The democratic argument here is that, through practices acquired over the push and pull of the last 40 years, understandings gleaned from multi-cultural and multi-generational experiences, and values that have been generated thereby--coaxed into being, nourished, and held--we have more to work with than is ordinarily acknowledged.

which is in Upper Manhattan, New York. I'm a co-founder in that school, which was founded by Leslie Alexander, a friend and colleague, and about 4-5 other teachers back in 1993. Once the school started, I stayed for five years. I taught kindergarten and first grade there. I've also taught pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade at the River East Elementary School which is a well-known progressive school in New York City in East Harlem. And it still exists. I have also worked at the Central Park East School as the assistant to the director for two years. And I taught Spanish language arts to students of the Central Park East Secondary School when it first began.

Before I actually worked in public schools in New York City, I was the bilingual education coordinator for the New York State Division for Youth. And that was a job I sort of fashioned myself. When I got out of graduate school-my graduate degree is in English as a second language, and it was acquired at Albany State University-I got out of that program and quickly got a clerk job at a state agency called "The Division for Youth" in Albany, New York. My husband was still in graduate school, so I got a job.

Because of my degree and my background being bilingual, I was asked to help the agency create a program for children from New York and other parts of this state, who were bilingual in prison. These were juvenile delinquent kids, as young as 14, some of them, and as old as 18, some of them. I was very, very young. I had just finished school and there was no program, so they asked me, "Please help us start one." So, I started from scratch. I did that job for eight years--everything from creating the assessments, to traveling around the state to interview children and their families, to then writing a grant-which we got, and creating programs for children in these facilities-which eventually included parent involvement and the like. That was very wonderful, rewarding work, but it took me away from home a fair amount. So, once I had my son and he was ready for school, I decided traveling around was not a good idea, because I feared that as good a mom I was trying to be, if I wasn't there, he could have trouble. And I remember thinking "My son's not going to end up in one of these places." I remember that being a very vivid thought. So, in a month, literally, after eight years of working in that program, really loving the work and learning enormous amounts, I decided to quit that job. I didn't know what else I was going to do, but I knew I wasn't going to be traveling around without my son and my daughter, any longer. So, I left someone else in my role, and the program continued for years after that. I moved back to New York City with my husband, who was living there, working there. Then, found a school --

CT: This program was in Albany?

LA: It was everywhere. It was located in Albany, while my family was in New York, but I traveled to Ithaca, New York, to Bushwick in Brooklyn, to Goshen, New York, to--I forget the---oh yes. How could I forget? Wingdale, New York, where the program was in a psychiatric facility, a hospital. It was quite a frightening place...So I had to be in five locations each month, and that got to be a bit much. As I say, the teachers continued. Each site had its

own teacher, its own materials. They continued. The person who helped me start the program went into my position as the coordinator, and the agency took over the funding and kept the program going until the federal funds were finished. And I moved on. And I went to live in New York City.

Then, my next job was to find the kind of school for my children that I wanted to attend my whole life and didn't think existed except in story books. And lo and behold, a friend of mine found Central Park East I-- actually, she found River East for her son. She was a neighbor and a good friend, and our children were in the same class in the third grade at a local public school, and it was not working out very well. And so, she somehow, she was Bank Street College and heard about the progressive schools there, and went to the interview and the orientation, and she said, "I found a school for the kids." And I said, "How do you get your kids to Manhattan when we live way up in the Bronx?" and she said, "We'll figure that part out later." And I didn't think that was such a good idea. I thought, "I can't do that. I can't do that." She said, "Yeah, you can, and we have to get those kids out of the school they're in," And I thought, "All right. Let's try this. Let's see what happens." At that point, the kids were older. Lorraine had already come out of public school. I'd put her in a private school that had been no better. Her sixth-grade year was when we found River East. So, my friend's son went into River East, and my daughter went into CPE1 for 6th grade.

That same year was when they created the Central Park East Secondary School, and I was asked to help start the school, as one of the parents to help evaluate things and develop things and also to help by teaching Spanish, which I did part time for two years. I also substitute taught all throughout the grades in Central Park East 1, because what I did that first few months was just stay there all the time. And literally, I was doing everything. I would go to the staff meetings; I wouldn't say anything, but I would be there. I would be in my son's kindergarten classroom all day long, just as an unpaid volunteer. And so, I watched very closely the teacher in that classroom and did what she did. And she says--we became very, very close friends and still are close friends--the only reason she didn't get rid of me was because I didn't bother my son, David. She said, "It was clear you aren't interested in watching or interfering with him at all, because you were never where he was; you were interested in watching everything else that was happening." And she said I was also helpful because I was interested in what the kids were doing.

And, I remember thinking, "There's no place like this; and I can't learn how to do this kind of teaching, which is what I always wanted to do, except for here. So, if there's no program, and I'm an unpaid volunteer, I'll just learn right here!" And I have to say that much of what I still do is modeled after the core beliefs of Yvonne Smith from Central Park East 1. The chief value being children's voices are paramount, and their choices are paramount. And how she set up the room, and how she talked with children, and how she helped them be with each other were really, I think, the most important

things. So, who I am today is largely due to what I lived while I watched these teachers work with these students. It was what I'd always wanted to be, but I couldn't find a place to do it, so I just wouldn't do it.

Then, after being the assistant director there, and that not being much of a fun job, and things there getting difficult, I decided I would try this teaching classroom thing on my own. I took the chance. That year, they had a summer kindergarten program for kids called "Bright Beginners." And the people in the district knew of me because of Central Park East 1, and they took a chance. They interviewed me for the teaching job at the kindergarten level. And the woman said, "But you have absolutely no experience." But at that point, I was about 38, 39 years old, had two kids, and had some life experience to bring. So she said "You know what? I'm going to take chance. I like Yvonne. I know Yvonne. I'm going to take a chance." And I remember thinking, "Well, I'll either hate this and I'll know that, or I won't hate it." And I remember that I arrived the morning of the first day, to set up my kindergarten classroom, in a taxicab with rugs and crayons and an assortment of things. And as I set up that room, I never felt so excited, so joyful. And I've been teaching ever since. I taught at River East Elementary School for about three years, which is the school that my son then ended up going to. And I taught kindergarten and first grade there.

Then the opportunity to go start my own school came up when I was asked by Leslie to do that. She had taken a sabbatical and said, "Let's start our own school." And at that point, I'd had enough exposure to places like Prospect and the Workshop Center at City College to think, "I know some things, some basic important things. And I know she's going to run the show, so I can still play at this. I can still figure this thing out." And I remember thinking, "We're going to put in our school all the stuff we know that's really important, that we've been gathering." But I have to tell you that I have always this sense, and it began in that teaching portion of my career, that I don't necessarily make decisions about my life. I feel like life happens to me, and I go along with it. And, a lot of times I feel like I have to do the thing that scares the bejesus out of me. I'll be really scared about something, and I'll go, "But you have to try this thing, obviously, because if you're so scared of it, it must be something very, very important." So I go for it. And when she said, "Let's do this thing," I said, "How much of this can I manage, can I handle so I don't feel unsafe?" And I said, "I can handle a classroom. I can handle that job, so if I do that, if that's what I focus on, we can start a new school. You take care of that part, and I'll do this part." And, that was essentially a very important decision. I had what turned into internships of my own making, both as the assistant director to the principal and as a classroom teacher. As the coordinator/administrator person, I learned about the whole school because I was all throughout it. Then, I went into the classroom of the age level of kids I was very interested in and curious about and I interned there. I took the time to gain experience in a school where I could learn, and then I was ready to take the plunge, to create the kind of

school I believed in. And, I remember at that moment I thought, "You're doing a very big thing here, this starting up a school thing."

I began to realize that I had been very closed down and bored in school. I never thought of myself as particularly smart or particularly capable in school. I was sort of your average student that made sure she got her work done and stayed out of the line of fire of the teachers. Pretty much. And I thought, "That's pretty good." Now, in my mother's eyes, I was the moon, the stars, and the heavens above. So, no matter what I did, she was happy. Happier than happy. So there was no pressure there. I never was someone that had to be watched to do homework or reminded to do homework at all. I always loved reading and doing well in school, or what I considered to be well. But in school, I was not particularly noticed. So when I thought about creating a place, it had to be public. Number 1. That was very important to me. That it be in New York City where I grew up, that was very important. And that it be accessible to all kinds of kids, that was very important to me. And that they learned to live with each other the way kids at CPE1 learned to live with each other, just by being together every day and doing stuff together. And that you would learn a whole lot by having kids in that situation. But I remember the other motivation which I thought was a cool secret was I would catch up on all the learning I had missed, because I had never been able to touch things and question things and make mistakes like that--openly, anyway, in school--so I thought, "Wow! If I teach kids in this way of figuring things out and I'm just watching them all the time, I'm bound to learn a lot of stuff that I missed!" And that's how I approach my teaching even now. I think about, "What are you curious and interested about right now, and how can you weave that into a curriculum with kids and then just watch them all?" And that's just a really fun thing!

I moved up from kindergarten/first grade after about 15 years because I figured I wanted to know what happens next, at a slightly older age, with kids learning to read and write. Everything. Just everything. So now I'm teaching 2nd and 3rd grade for the second year. And, of course, along the way I've also continued to do my internship thing that I do, going to places. Now, there are many organizations and programs and things that didn't exist when I started--and I belong to a lot of them--because I feel that not only does it help my work, they nurture me, and therefore, my work can be better. That's how I think about that. So I've probably segued into some of your other questions...

CT: I'm just going to say back a couple of issues I hear you facing. One, making...your work grew out of my own motivations and out of my own curiosity. You really gave a shape to a lot of it. You're not talking yet about issues you faced other than learning how to do it.

LA: Oh, okay.

CT: So, if you could talk a little bit about where you began to see education/teaching, as a political act? What kinds of experiences led you there?

LA: Okay. My undergraduate degree is actually in elementary education. And I went to high school and undergraduate school in Puerto Rico in the '70s. It was obviously a very critical time here in the states, and I was very connected to what was happening here in the states-in the Civil Rights movement. The Vietnam War was a big issue in my life as a 14-year-old. All the way from 13 on, I was very aware of this stuff. It was strange. Since I was living in a very different kind of place, that stuff was not reverberating there. There were political things happening there, but they were more about the independence and nationalist movements in Puerto Rico, and I was watching those things, but not involved in them as much. But, I was very interested in the political movements here, because I still felt very connected to New York and my life here.

CT: So, you were born in Puerto Rico...

LA: Actually, I was born here.

CT: You were born in New York?

LA: I was born in New York.

CT: Then, when did you go back to Puerto Rico?

LA: When I was 14, my dad passed away, and my mom whisked us back to Puerto Rico.

CT: Then you went to high school there?

LA: I ended up finishing school there. I went to middle school, high school-- actually 9th grade, high school, and college. Undergraduate school.

CT: How did you get back to the states?

LA: For graduate school. We came back to the states because we needed to be able to live together on campus somewhere and have money.

CT: You married a Puerto Rican also from New York City.

LA: I married a Puerto Rican and my daughter, Lorraine, was born in Puerto Rico. So we moved back to the States to be able to go to graduate school, because there was no financial aid for graduate students in Puerto Rico at the time.

I watched U.S. politics from afar as I was growing up. But, anyway, so I began to become political at that age. Being very angry about war and about how...I had cousins who had been to the war, and I was very worried and upset by the war. And certainly by the Civil Rights stuff that was going on. And excited by it, too. But I was in Puerto Rico and none of that stuff was happening, so I was watching it from afar.

Then, let me think about this--when I went to undergraduate school, I was in general studies. This wonderful small program called "general studies" where you went if you didn't know what you wanted to be. I was interested in a lot of things, and I had a lot of questions about things, but I had no idea what I wanted to be. So this was perfect for me, a General Studies curriculum.

In the 3rd year, they would allow you to take classes in any of the departments, and the sociology department, social sciences department, was where all of the real die-hard marchers were--this was the independence movement, this was the heavy-duty folk. And I used to say I was not a revolutionary; I was an evolutionary. I didn't participate in that overt way, but I had very strong feelings, and I wanted to make change. If I had to say, "Where did it all begin?," I think it was then. I wanted to make change that was lasting change. And I knew that that takes time and that's complicated, but that's where it started. And I started reading.

I started taking classes in the education department. That's where I chose to go. Which was kind of lame because they didn't march anywhere, teachers, you know? They didn't do any of that stuff! But I found it very interesting. And I was very curious about learning, because now I had a one-year-old daughter. And I become completely obsessed with how this one-year-old was learning stuff, in general. And so, I start reading child development books, and I start researching this stuff in my classes. And I start looking into how kids learn language: particularly, how to learn language. And I come upon a book called *Summerhill*. Anything from the States I would grab on. And I read *Summerhill*, and I become fascinated with the whole notion of freedom, and the expressions of freedom of children and how they can be nurtured and what's too much freedom and all of that. When I get obsessed with something, I really get obsessed with it--I look for every book; I read everything. And it was very encouraged in the department when you had these passions.

I was fortunate enough to have an advisor who was very well known, and is still well known, as an historian and a leftist, but a real educator. Professor Angel Quintero Alfaro, who often invited students to his house to have conversations like the one we're having today. "What excites you?" "What are you interested in?" I remember having that conversation with him in his parlor where he asked, "Well, what do you want to do with this education stuff?" I said, "I don't know. I'm afraid of being a teacher." All I had was the memories of sitting behind a desk in what I called "sit down - shut up school." I knew I was never going to do that, and I was afraid to even walk into a school building for a long time. But I was excited about the possibility of there being a different way to do it. Like in the *Summerhill* book. *Summerhill* the school was in England and, probably by [sic] didn't even exist anymore. But, I thought, "There's no place like that where I live." And, I couldn't think about starting a school at my age. I wasn't even going to entertain that thought.

So I continued studying, I continued learning about language development which is fascinating in Spanish, because of the way Spanish is structured. I continued raising my daughter and watching her. She was a very quick learner and very verbal. Also, she had a million people around her. She was the first baby in both families, so she had attention all the time from everybody. In fact, I have her baby book where I wrote down all my observations of her development as I watched her closely. I have this thing held together with rubber bands. I started sort of noticing things and writing them down as I watched her, as she grew.

I also continued to take classes in education, and I took all the classes I'd need to get a license to be a teacher, still thinking, "I'm not going to be a teacher." I took all required reading courses, still thinking, "I'm not going to be a teacher." But then a graduate school opportunity popped up in the States. So, it was a chance for me to come back to the States with my family, and not leave them behind, and continue going to school, which, of course avoided me having to decide what else I was going to do!!

(laughter)

I made a lot of wonderful friends in graduate school. There was a wonderful Puerto Rican community of former New York people living in Albany, going to school. And they were very political, so I began to think about it as a more mature person. And when I graduated from graduate school, still I'm deciding, "I'm not done; *definitely* not teaching ESL." I *hated* ESL.

CT: And, your master's program was in ESL.

LA: It was in ESL, and I hated it. I couldn't hate it more. I hated it politically; I felt it made no sense. I hated it sort of technically; I didn't understand it though I did well in the classes. Once again, I did well-didn't shine; again I felt invisible. I knew that as a woman, and as a Puerto Rican woman in the middle '70s, I knew I needed a graduate degree if I was going to do okay in life. So I said, "I can do this one; I can do this." Oh, I forgot to mention that I wrote a dissertation for undergraduate school. I had to--because it was a general studies program, that was a requirement--so I wrote my dissertation about Summerhill and the notion of freedom for children in school. I still have that thing. It's about my strong belief in the idea that children need freedom in order to develop self-discipline and self-awareness and all these things. And then for graduate school, I didn't have to write a thesis for the degree. I just had to take some comprehensive exams, which I passed, and still I vowed never to enter a classroom.

So I did the work of the bilingual coordinator, which was facilitating good education for kids who had been way screwed up. But I would visit each of those programs every month, and I would just salivate when I watched the teacher at work--I would think, "I wish I could do that!" And part of my visit was to observe the teacher and literally write down everything I observed, and I called those "field visits." And I would give that information back to the teacher in "field visit reports". Then, we'd discuss what I'd seen, and the

teacher would just continue. I created this job for myself: and since nobody else knew what to do with this group of kids and families, they just let me do it. They'd give me money to travel to visit them and to arrange for their families to visit them and that was great because they sometimes couldn't afford to see their own kids for long periods of time because they were so far away from New York City.

I also went to conferences. I went to bilingual conferences, and that was a political thing, too. I started going to bilingual conferences to learn about bilingual education. And I learned some things like, just because everybody is Latino and political and in bilingual ed, they're not always so nice to you. They might not help you." It was a very competitive time, people grabbing for the funding, the control and the power. There was a lot of nastiness in New York, politically, and in the school system, which I didn't

know about since I hadn't been there for so long, and never as an adult. So I learned some really important lessons about taking care of yourself and what boundaries you needed to set for people and stuff like that.

But the business of deciding to be a classroom teacher and making that my political activity came about, as I described before, once I found CPE and saw, "Hey! There really are schools like this, and you can be a part of that." I remember thinking, "You have to earn being a part of it. You have to pay your dues. You can't just walk in. Just because you have a teaching degree and say, 'I want a job here.' That's not how it works here." And I learned a lot about the culture of the school, the dynamics in the school. Debbie--who you know--I remember, asked me one day when I was teaching Spanish for the secondary school, she asked one day out of the blue, "Louisa, what would you be?" Nobody had ever asked me a question like that! I had no idea what to say. Here I am, I don't know, I was 39, 40 years old. I'm a grown person and had a career; I've got children I've raised, and a marriage, and keep house, and someone asks me, "What would I be?" I was blown over. And I just stood there. I was almost annoyed at that question, like, "Who *is* this lady asking me this question?" But that question stayed inside of me and really, really percolated. So I think that that question turned me in a direction of, "All right, you're 39 years old, and you're trained to be a teacher, and you know that you can teach in this way, and you know where to learn it, and so what are you going to do?" So then I took the risks that I talked about before in terms of going into it.

CT: So, when did the North Dakota Study Group enter the mix?

LA: Okay. I was at Muscota. It was 1995, so Muscota was two years old. I knew about the North Dakota Study Group because I knew people who were in it, but what I had heard about it was that it was a very self-selecting group of people. That it was like a progressive ed think tank. And only those people ever went, and "those people"--the phrase "those people"--when it was said to me, I knew what that meant. That meant "all white," that meant "probably middle age or older, people that had been doing this work a really long time,

and you don't even really know what this work is, because you've never really done it." So a lot of barriers in my mind got constructed. I constructed them in my mind about, "You'll never get there; forget that; you're not going there." And that was a disappointment to me, because I thought that this place was not about that, but I guess that exists everywhere I'm thinking. "Fine, that's okay." I'm of the belief if I'm not wanted in a place, I ain't going there. Easy decision. And I'd heard from a friend that she had gone there, and the experience was very unpleasant for her. Now, this is a person of color, and she'd been invited, and it had gone very poorly. And I thought, "Well, I'm *definitely* not going there, then." But I remember thinking, "That's a real shame" because it's important that we be in places and that we explode these things somehow, but I didn't see myself as somebody doing that. Because, I'm an evolutionary, not a revolutionary.

A couple of years go by, and I am exposed to Prospect at this point--as a parent--mostly as a parent in those days, still. I am exposed to the Workshop Center--and ETN had also begun by then, because I'd go to any event at CPE I. I'd be there. Whatever it was; whatever they called it, I'd go. So now the school Muscota has begun, it's two years old, and the director, Leslie, and one of the teachers, Grace Schickler, says to me, "You have to come to the North Dakota Study Group." And I said, "No. What I hear is that it's a little bit tricky to go to, this place, and you're going far away, and it's so cold there." The usual thing--it's cold, and I have no connections there. But they say "Nope, nope, nope. We need you to come. We need you to come because the group is changing radically, they really want more people of color, and they want to hear from people of color." And I said, "What do I talk about, being a person of color? What would I talk about?" I had done a lot of cultural awareness kind of work in my Division for Youth days, but it was a very integrated group of people, and it was very clear what we did; it had a lot of integrity. But I didn't want to sit around, storytelling about the Puerto Rican girl from Brooklyn any more. It felt like, "I'm past that stage." I didn't want to do that. And it felt like a side show. I thought, "Nah, I'm not doing that." Because I felt like what happened to my friend could happen again and then there's no place to go; to leave to once you there. But they said, "No, it's not going to be like that. We promise you. We're planning this thing, and here's what we need you to do. We need you to be on the teacher panel. They have a panel at night and teachers tell their stories, and it could be any story you want." And I thought, "Wait. They want me as a speaker?" And they said, "Oh, yeah, yeah. We want you to come and be on the panel that speaks to the whole group." Well, that turned my head around, because I thought, "What do I have to say? I just started teaching. The school is brand new; I don't know what to say." But the idea of talking from the perspective of being a teacher, about what I was learning, was very exciting. That exploded my fears; away went "You're brown, they're white; they're going to look at you funny; you don't have the right work." All that went away. "I can talk about this; this is something I can talk about."

My excitement about learning how to be a good teacher, I can talk about. I remember that I seized on one story about one little boy who was half Puerto Rican, half Dominican, who was in my class and was having a hard time learning how to read. His mother was a district court judge, so he exploded the stereotypes by having a hard time. And, I remember writing a journal entry and saying, "You don't put away your fear of the audience; just talk on paper--what would you tell these people what you were thinking about this boy." And I wrote this journal entry January 5th--I'll never forget it, because it just came out; it just poured right out of me about how this little boy, about how he didn't do much in school during the day. He had a twin sister who was in the class, and she was the opposite. She did everything. She did everything right away. And he was just sort of laying around. And he was very sweet, and he didn't cause a problem, and so I loved him. And we went ice skating, and I remember how immediately he took to that activity, to ice skating, and how well he did right away and that blew my mind. And my thinking, and I wrote in that journal entry, "If Brown kids could have what a lot of middle-class White kids have--that their parents say doesn't matter, that you're not good at school--let's look at *what you are good at* and let's make that happen for you--they would be okay! They'd do well! They'd be all right!" You know? It was the Winter Olympics, and the speed skating guy, whose name now escapes me, was doing his thing, and I remember watching him and saying, "See! See! See! That's important! My little guy can do that! The journal entry is all about what I see my role as a teacher is, which is finding that thing that each person can be good at, that it's different for everybody. So, your job is to make that possible, and to let them know that that's important. Whatever it is that you're good at, that's important! You hold on to that!

The talk. I remember that I went from sitting behind a table in that room...with friends. I mean, my friends were near me, and I knew that I had friends in the audience that I would speak to in my head when I would be afraid. But the minute I started—and I'm sure I read what I wrote; I'm sure of it--but the minute I started reading it and talking about it, all of my fears just melted away, and I felt like this was a group that understands what I'm talking about, and they believe the same thing! This is not the group that my girlfriend felt uncomfortable in; this is a different group. And the realization that I could help start a good school for kids, that I was making a difference in that group by saying what I was saying and even being there, suddenly that just exploded in me. I thought, WOW! So it felt something in between evolutionary and revolutionary You know? Safe enough.

CT: You've been now in that group for a long time.

LA: Ten years.

CT: So what effect has that had on you, as an educator, your ideas, relationships?

LA: It has changed my life. And, it's so interesting to me that for one weekend a year, I can do that. But, I would say the same thing for other things I do. But I'll speak about this group in particular. It changed my life because there were people there who, in fact, were those people that were in the think tank, that were very, very, very smart; that were very, very, very, very committed; that were White; that were middle class or upper middle class; that were well known in their field in academics, in higher education; that were well known in progressive education. And, they all went by first name; they all welcomed you warmly; they all were hanging on things that I said; they all played ping-pong at night and talked about stuff. I felt like part of that group instantly. I remember that one of the things that did that for me was that on the Sunday, when the whole group would get together in the big room and say goodbye to each other by saying how the experience had been for them, Vito mentioned my name. I was sitting in that big room watching--as well as listening to what everybody was saying--but watching the dynamic of the group, and listening to Vito. And suddenly, when he said my name and something I had said two days ago, I...I was shaking. I couldn't believe it. I thought, "Oh, my God!" So I guess the feeling of not being invisible as an adult and understanding as an adult what it meant to be invisible as a kid for so long really hit me.

Then, I became a "revolutionary." I remember thinking, "You have to stop being afraid; you've got to take risks now and embolden yourself, because what you're going to do now is not just for you; and it's not about being quiet in a little corner, in a safe corner anymore. You now have to really stand up and be out there...you have to do the things that you wanted to do at 13 when you were listening to the Civil Rights Movement stuff from Puerto Rico, and you wanted to be there so badly and be a grown up so you could have a part in that--now is your chance. If you don't do it now, you're going to feel really stupid because, come on! There's no better chance!"

So I began to see myself as a real important person in that group. I began to speak up, to speak out, to share. It started with sharing a lot of my work, continuing to share a lot of my work there. It also started with going back home and talking to people about the group. That was one sort of layer of it--a feeling of importance, feeling visible people that were renowned and who I admired enormously felt that way about me, too. And I hadn't done half the stuff they had done. And feeling like, "You need to own this." Because if you respect them and they respect you and you don't respect you, then you're saying that they don't really matter, and that's stupid. Stop doing that. And, of course, I had a network supporting me to do that. It was also an avenue for my writing. It was also a way to see my writing not just as something I do on the side that helps me think and helps me stay safe. It became a way to also enact my beliefs, put them out there, and have other people know who I was. And then practice writing, itself, also.

So that was one layer, and I did that for a few years. Really working on that kind of stuff. I kept going back. Needless to say, I absolutely kept going back, put my money where my mouth was, continued recruiting people, helped the group reorganize itself, racially, ethnically, and organizationally. But around the 5th or 6th year, something big happened. There was an explosion in that group. The group's evolving integration just exploded. And there was a meeting at which issues of race got very, very explosive, because of people attending who had never been in the group, had known about the group, and reacted to the way that the group managed itself. And that began a series of years where the issues of race and I think to a lesser degree, but also there, class began to be very explicit--top, front, and center discussion in the group. It was a very controversial, difficult time for the group and people in the group. And oddly enough, I was extremely comfortable. I could be okay with everybody who was uncomfortable with it, and at that same time, I suddenly felt very comfortable, because I felt like now I'm going to learn. I'm now going to cut my revolutionary teeth for real. And I remember that I spent hours at each of the meetings helping in any way I could. I would be at any conflict, any meeting, in sidebar conversations, in arguments. I would help organize groups. So this issue of race and difference could really be talked about, through the discomfort everyone felt. And, what that has done for me is that, number one, I have come to realize the place of race in my life and the place of social class and the importance of having that front and center in my consciousness all the time. Not feeling the victim of it anymore. I have realized, then, that the responsibility that I have has to be parallel to that. That if I got that out of that experience, then I have to give in equal measure. And I learned how to do it, because by struggling through watching other people struggle through how to talk about this thing, I learned. I learned how to do it. So I became very committed to helping and to continuing that work, but also carrying that hopeful attitude about this issue everywhere else I went.

So the point is, that when I wasn't there I wasn't afraid to talk about race, and when other people were afraid to talk about race in any circle I would bring it up, and I would be all right because I knew that they'd get uncomfortable and they'd get over it, and it would be okay, and you'd really be helping with this. That was a big important thing.

It still continues to be a forum for my teaching work. Any place that gives me a chance to talk about my teaching and learning stuff--piece of cake! You got me! But I feel like when I add a dimension about talking about race and class and gender--and I'm adding to that now physical and other challenges, people who have challenges, not just speaking other languages kinds of challenges, but really serious stuff (autism and those sorts of things). I am now working to make my school first and foremost be a place that's very responsive to children with special needs of that kind, because it is not that. Although we have children like that, and we do *wonderful* things to educate and help them, and we are amazingly effective. There are certain people that are extraordinary in that. But the school, as a whole, has not tackled that as

an issue, so with the help of someone else--really, she's the one that's going to do it. She was here this year, but I so admire her. And I want to stand alongside her doing that, so that's sort of another layer added.

And I know that the North Dakota Study Group is a laboratory for me. It's a place where I can go and really think; a place where I can be really angry. I am often very even tempered in public places. I try very hard to be controlled, disciplined, because I feel like if you go oft: the conversation can be shut down. And I think, you cannot do that; other people can do that that's up to them, but you cannot do that. But in this place, I get good and mad, and I rant. And, I like to think I'm being coherent in my ranting! But I *rant*. I let myself get good and angry, and it feels really *good*, and there, again, is that sense of being a revolutionary, and I feel like I get recharged and energized and emboldened there, so that when I come back, even if I have to be tempered, I am also passionate.

And I love all of those people, which is another thing I must say. I *love* Vito, and I *love* the Featherstones, like I love-I love them like family. I mean they are--I *love*--I'm going to name every single one of them that I have been there with. I've become part of their family. I was part of the experience when Jay got sick, and he and I played together with magnets, making poetry. He had just come back from his illness and his treatment, and I remember thinking, "I love this person; he's part of my family forever." And then I adopted his family, and when his granddaughter was born, I sent him a key chain so he could put pictures of her in it, and that becomes a place where I see members of my family, that I wouldn't see otherwise. And they love me and they admire me and I admire them and we laugh together and we play together and we fight together and we feel the world together. When I have had troubles in my school, big troubles and sometimes not so big troubles, I send e-mails to the NDSG's listserv, and I get a response back that makes me know that I am not alone. We love each other in that way; we support each other.

Sometimes, we take political action about things, but mostly we love each other. And that group continues to grow and evolve and add people to it. And, it celebrated an important milestone in its history, and I was a part of documenting and being a part of the history. And I remember thinking, "I'm a real elder now; they're asking me; I'm a part of this experience." I learned from it like I learn in my family listening to the history of the elders in my family. So, I would die for anybody in that group.

CT: Anything else we should have on this tape, that you want people to know?

LA: I think most of all I want them to know that wherever I am, that the work that we do there, that one weekend a year for the last 10 years, is always inside of me, brewing inside of me. That, when I am afraid--and, I'm always afraid--when a new thing comes up that you have to fight, the first thing I do is get afraid that I'm not going to do it enough or right, and I know-

-I'm old enough to know now, thankfully--that everybody goes through that; I don't think it's just me anymore but I used to. The first thing I do is think about all of the people in the NDSG, the study group and in Prospect and in ETN, all those groups--and many of the people are the same people in these groups--that *they're right next to me*; that *I never stand alone in these battles*. When they are the most painful, I *always* know that they are right there standing next to me. I see myself through their eyes; that's a big piece of it for me. I stopped feeling like that scared little girl, and I suddenly see myself as the person they all know, admire and love. I feel that way, and therefore, I fight really, really hard. And, I'm usually good at it, because I'm not doing it alone or just for me; I'm doing it in their name.

This last year, I had to make an enormously difficult decision. My high school group, which had never met in Puerto Rico, decided it would meet, and it was my very dearest best friend who convened the group. I was not going to be able to turn her down. And also she had just recovered from a brain tumor that almost killed her. So I knew in my heart that she had said, "I'm alive--wait a minute--I'm going to find all of the people that I love, starting with my very best friend who lives far away, and we're going to get back together again, and we're going to see each other again," and they worked very hard to create this reunion after 35 years.

CT: Wow.

LA: And, knowing who she is, I knew how it would go. It was a Prospect event. It was exquisite, like a North Dakota Study Group event. And so, of course, I had to go, but then that meant I couldn't go to the North Dakota Study Group. Oh, my Lord. I was tearing my hair out about not being there, about who I wasn't going to see; about the discussions; about the fact that the book was going to be celebrated, and I was in the book. All these things--I knew what I had to do, but it was very painful. So I did what I usually do. I stayed in touch with everybody through email. I was in on a lot of the conversations and the planning. I was in on a lot of stuff without actually being there. And that was really helpful to me. So that no matter where I am, no matter what happens, the effect of that group in my heart is always growing. And you know? I don't know from year to year what's going to happen with that group, and I don't think anyone does, but we're all so committed to each other. That's what I want them to know--that I love them in the deepest possible way--intellectually, and emotionally, and politically--and that no matter where we all are--like my high school group--we're together, and that's what I want them to know.

CT: Good. Thank you very much.

LA: Yes.

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