A TEI Project

Interview of Sandra Serrano Sewell

Table of contents

1. Transcript

1.1. Session One
April 7, 2011

HUNT

This is Jackie Hunt. I'm here with Sandra Serrano Sewell in Pasadena, California, and today we'll be conducting session one of an oral history with Sandra. Thank you very much for being here and talking with us. We're looking forward to hearing your story and hearing about your experiences. The first question, where and when were you born?

SEWELL

I was born in 1948, April of 1948, in Lorain, Ohio, which is a steel town in the Midwest.

HUNT

What was your given name at birth?

SEWELL

Sandra.

HUNT

Just Sandra. And the last names that you have now?

SEWELL

No, it was Sandra Soledad Serrano.

HUNT

When you were born, what was your family like? Who were you living with?

SEWELL

Both my mother and my father. I was the firstborn of eventually four children. My mother was ten years younger than my father, so when I was born, my mother was eighteen, my father was twenty-eight. He had served in World War II and was working at the steel mill, and my mother was a homemaker.

HUNT

Can you tell me a little bit more about them? What were their names and what were they like?

SEWELL

My mother's name was Amparo [Magdaleno] and my father's name was Manuel [Serrano]. My father had one sibling and mother and a stepfather. His mother was very entrepreneurial. She ran a boarding house in Lorain for Mexicans who worked in the steel mill. She would collect their money and then get them money orders so they could send money back to their families in Mexico. They were gambling at the local bar, and so she started to make booze in her house and allowed them to gamble in her boarding house. She would collect a fee from them for doing that. So she was very, very entrepreneurial. My father was raised pretty well until the Depression [the Great Depression] came, and then when the Depression came, it really hit everyone hard and he had real hard times that really affected how he looked at money and how he raised his children to look at money. My mother was the eldest of thirteen children, came from a very Roman Catholic household. Both her parents were from Mexico. My grandfather also worked in the steel mill. Basically, she had seen my father like three times and then married him. She says she was not in love with him. She married him to get out of the house because she didn't want the responsibility anymore of being the eldest. At that time I think there was only about seven kids or eight kids. So she flew the coop. Of course, she said being with my father and him providing for her, ended up falling in love with him. So I think that was not so uncommon as it might be today.

HUNT

Do you know how your parents met?

SEWELL

They met at a dance, at a dance. They met at a dance.

HUNT

What was your relationship like with your parents, being the eldest? How long was it before you had to share them with another sibling?

SEWELL

Actually, pretty soon. My brother is two years younger than I am, but as I was the first child and the first grandchild, I was pretty spoiled. I can look at my photographs and see that I was always in frilly dresses, always looking like a little dress-up doll. From what I'm told, all the aunts and uncles fussed over me and everything. I had a great relationship with my parents and a wonderful relationship with my grandparents. My grandparents lived next door. We lived next door to my grandparents. My parents bought a house and my grandparents bought a house and we shared a common driveway, so between the two homes I was very comfortable, very well taken care of. I have really no complaints. I listen to people today talk about their childhood and I was like, geez, that was not my experience. I truly was raised very middle-class and very, I would say, Suzy Homemaker type of, Donna Reed type of household, so, very fifties.

HUNT

So your brother was born two years after you. Can you talk about your other siblings and when they came along?

SEWELL

Then my sister was born two years after that and then my other brother was born, I think about two years after that. So it was like two years between each child.

HUNT

It sounds like family was a really important part of your experience growing up.

SEWELL

It was, because my extended family was so large. I had all these uncles and aunts, and many of them were not that much older than I am, especially when you're growing up and playing in the summer and playing games and stuff like

that. My one aunt was just two years older and then one was three years older and four years older, five years older, so it's like my grandmother had a kid every year. So, yes, I was raised with a very high sense of family and family obligation.

HUNT

Was Lorain kind of the area where all your family stayed?

SEWELL

Yes. Well, who I knew was just my grandparents and my uncles and aunts. On my father's side, his brother went to Mexico when the war broke out. They decided who would stay here to serve and, accordingly, they flipped a coin. My father was the winner or the loser, whichever way you put it, and his brother went to Mexico and became an attorney in Mexico and his mother passed away while he was in the war. So my father—that was the end of his family. He didn't come from a large family, didn't know relatives or anything like that, so essentially my mother's family was family.

HUNT

I see. How did your family come to live in Ohio to begin with?

SEWELL

My grandmother on my father's side came to open the boarding house because she had heard that there were a number of Mexicans moving to this town to work in the steel mill. She was a single woman at that time with two boys and thought that would be a good business for her. So she packed up and left from Laredo, Texas, and she moved there. My grandfather moved from a little town outside of Guadalajara, Mexico, to work in the steel mill and also to flee the religious persecutions that were happening in Mexico around the time. That would have been around 1920, somewhere around that time.

HUNT

That's really interesting. What do you know about that situation?

SEWELL

My whole life, my grandparents were extremely, extremely religious Catholics. So, you know, it was like, outside of each other and their children, that was the most important thing

in their life, which was funny because my father was not like that whatsoever. We were raised with god is wherever you want him to be. And so if you wanted him to be that tree, he's a tree. If you want it to be whatever, that was it, and that you should have personal freedom to decide what kind of god you worshipped. But he also stressed that when in Rome, do as the Romans. So to avoid problems, we went to church and we went to catechism and we went to all that stuff and made all our sacraments, but it was mostly just to keep peace in the family. My dad would flip the coin on Sunday, and if it landed on tails, the boys went to church. If it landed on heads, the girls went to church. He said when it landed on the rim, he would go to church. Somehow, it never landed on the rim. [laughs]

HUNT

What was your mother's take on religion?

SEWELL

I think she was—because her parents were so religious, she rebelled. She just went along with my dad, but also wanted to keep peace. She didn't all the time go to church, but she would always send us to Mass with my grandparents, so that sort of made everything okay. I was raised in a very open household, politically and religiously and racially very open. So that was, I think, something different for those times, for the fifties.

HUNT

Can you talk about how your family dealt with politics? Did they talk about politics in the home?

SEWELL

Yes, they did. My dad was active in the Progressive Party. He was a [Franklin D.] Roosevelt man, but after Roosevelt died, he became active in the Progressive Party. My mother was there, too, and was active with that. My dad was active in union politics for the steel mill. My dad was a passer at the Stockholm Peace Petition, which was highly unusual for a Mexican man to be—Mexican American man to be passing that petition calling for the control of nuclear arms. They were pretty liberal, in fact, very, very liberal. Both of my parents were accused of being communist. They were not

registered members of the Communist Party probably because, from what my mother says, it would not have been practical, but all their friends and everything were. They had a lot of registered friends that were registered communists at the time and met with them socially to discuss politics and things like that. I remember those meetings when I was young and I remember that then they all disappeared, and my mom said they all disappeared because that was during [Joseph] McCarthy and that everybody sort of—the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] came to town, they came to visit my grandparents to talk about my father. The FBI posted names of people that were potential communists on the utility poles, and my father's name was there, and if anybody had any information on his communist activities, that they would like to be informed. They came to my mom and questioned my mom. Then my mom called my dad at work and said, "The FBI is here." And my dad said, "Yeah, I know. They've already been here. Don't worry about it."

HUNT

Wow. So he didn't seem scared or fazed or—

SEWELL

No, from what I understand and from what my mother said, he said, "I believe what I believe, and I fought for my country and I have all these medals and I have commendations, so what's your problem?" That was pretty much it. He had a real good friend who was also a photographer that was a professor at Oberlin College, who was a very active member. He was like secretary of the Communist Party outside of Cleveland, and my dad was real good friends. I remember that man coming to the house a lot. So I suspect that if my father wasn't a bit cautious about what that might result in, he would have registered a communist.

HUNT

Do you think that your mom felt assured by what your father said? Like, “It will be fine. They've already here. There's nothing to worry about”?

SEWELL

She said that she was worried about it, but it was like, well, what are they going to do? There's not much that they can do. My dad was a steward in the union. He did lose the stewardship in the union. It was taken away from him.

HUNT

And that was because of his association?

SEWELL

That was a result of it, yes. They said it wasn't, but, you know, everybody knew that it was, but it didn't faze my dad. He kept doing what he was doing and going where he was going and thinking what he was thinking.

HUNT

Did you see any other negative consequences for any of your parents' friends or your neighbors related to this?

SEWELL

No, just that all these people disappeared, and, hence, we've spoken about it and I said, "What happened to all of them?" My mother would say, "Well, a good number of them were Jewish, and when McCarthyism came, everybody just split and went their ways. Some went back to New York." So what I gather was that there was a big push because they were—my mom said most of them had been college-educated. There was a big push to try to get the steel workers to become members of the party, and that's why they were all in Lorain. It was an organized effort to try to get members from the steelworkers.

HUNT

So as your grandparents were pretty strict with their religion and your parents took more of a loose view of religion, were you aware of religion as an issue when you were a child? Did you see the contrast between your family as a Catholic family and maybe other families of other religions?

SEWELL

No, not really. I mean, I accepted that we're going to go to church with my grandparents. I didn't feel fearful of being a Catholic or fearful of any of the ritual around Mass. That's what my grandparents did, and so I was lucky to go with them.

HUNT

It also sounds like your family was pretty progressive with regard to race and ethnicity as a characteristic of yourselves and as other people in your community. Would you say that Lorain had a significant population of Mexican Americans?

SEWELL

No, it didn't. It had prior to the Depression, but after the Depression there was only about two hundred families out of a population of about eighty thousand, because most people don't know, but the government was offering Mexican families to go back and paying their way for them to go back to Mexico, and so many families took that up and went back. In fact, here in Los Angeles, our first Mexican American school board member, Dr. Julian Nava's family had accepted the offer to go back. He got appendicitis the night before, so his family never went back, and then he became a school board member for the Valley's schools.

HUNT

That's really interesting. So how did the government phrase that?

SEWELL

I have no idea. I just know that that happened, and when I told people that that happened, people say, "No, it didn't. No, it didn't." Then I thought, well, do I have the story wrong or what? And then one day I was talking to Dr. Nava, and he said, "Oh, my god, you know about that. That's what happened to my family." And so then I knew it was true because that was his own personal experience.

HUNT

Wow. So what was your experience being a Mexican American as a minority in Ohio?

SEWELL

Well, a lot of people would think we would think we were Italian because of our last name ending in an "o." But Lorain was truly a melting pot, but more Eastern Europeans and Italians. I was raised with Czechoslovakians and Poles [people from Poland] and Ukrainians and all those European groupings, Russians. Hence, everyone was Catholic. I mean, it seemed like everyone was Catholic. I think Lorain at one time had thirty-two Catholic churches. But every ethnic

group had their own Catholic Church. But we didn't have a church because there wasn't enough of us, so we had a storefront that my grandfather helped found. It was called a mission, and eventually there was a church that was built and now there's a rather large church. Because what happened is when the Ford Motor Company came to the outskirts of Lorain to open up a factory, they recruited in Puerto Rico, so in the late—the mid—probably around '57, '58, a whole influx of Puerto Ricans came. You know, Puerto Ricans mostly are Catholics, so that gave a grounding for more of a population for the justification from the archdiocese to have a Spanish-speaking Catholic Church. So that's what happened. Growing up, you knew you were going to go to your own church, and the Polish Catholic church allowed the Spanish Mass to be held on Sundays at twelve o'clock, so that's how I was raised going to a Polish church that allowed us to have a Mass there in Spanish. So until we had our church, until we had the storefront, that's what was happening. Again, it was accepted. I mean, there were just certain things that—I didn't feel like I was being singled out or our families were being singled out or anything, because I would say it wasn't so much ethnicity or racial; it was economics.

HUNT

What do you mean?

SEWELL

Everybody's dad worked at the steel mill. So when your dad was on strike, their dads were on strike. When their dads were laid off, your dad was laid off. So everybody was in the same economic boat. They were just families struggling and trying to be part of the middle-class. I really don't think people had any time to get into ethnic differences. They were too busy surviving and too busy celebrating their own groupings' holidays, because definitely each grouping with the holidays that came about had a different way of celebrating something special to their ethnic grouping. In fact, international days were started, and to this day in Lorain you have a whole week called International Week [Lorain International Festival] where there's different

festivities happening. They have a queen. You wonder, okay, what's the queen this year going to be? Polish American, whatever she's going to be. I didn't have a problem dating. I dated various boys from different ethnic backgrounds in school, in high school. There was some racial disharmony with African Americans by the greater groupings. My family didn't buy into that, but it's funny, they didn't buy into that, they never said anything to us, they always told us everyone was equal, but somehow I think that if I came home with a black boyfriend, there would have been an issue, but it just never afforded the opportunity, so I was never able to really test that and see if that was so. But somehow in my mind I think that, so I think if I think that now I must have thought that then. So maybe I didn't open myself to any opportunity. I'd say people were, again, more interested in surviving, more interested in buying the new house on the other side of town and getting out of the poor side of town. I think I grew up with a pretty healthy childhood.

HUNT

So, leading into my next question, actually, can you describe your neighborhood where you lived when you were [unclear]?

SEWELL

When my parents bought this home, it was on the South Side, and that would have been a ghetto, but a ghetto of mixed groupings, not a ghetto of one group, lower income. Two blocks away was the steel mill that ran across probably about five miles, and so every day at three o'clock, the sky would turn black because the graphite would fall from the steel mill. They would be blowing out the graphite and all this graphite would sprinkle all about you. We'd say, "Oh, how cool. It's glitter," not realizing what a health hazard was being planted there. So it was a poorer neighborhood, and everybody that I grew up with, by the time we were in junior high school, had moved out of that area and moved to the West Side where the tract homes were building built. So it was newer and brighter and it was a sign of success.

HUNT

Was it still near the steel mill?

SEWELL

No, it was not at all.

HUNT

So it sounds like the steel mill was really kind of like the center of economics.

SEWELL

The steel mill ran everything. I'd tell my mom, "For all that you were involved in and all you did, why did you not hold the steel mill accountable to do things for the community? I don't understand that." And she said it really never entered their minds because it was providing jobs. So, I mean, they never thought about saying to the steel mill, "You need to provide a community pool," or, "You need to do this," or need to do that. No, she said it just never occurred to them.

HUNT

That's despite your father's involvement with the union.

SEWELL

Right. And everything. It just never occurred to them.

HUNT

So, being from a union family, what was your understanding of what the union was about and what they were intending to do?

SEWELL

Well, I didn't ever know a time of not knowing a union. Okay? So it was just part of my life and it was there to make life better for everyone because of the union. I remember, like, most kids are told fairy tales. I remember being told about the shirt factory fire in New York when I was little. I remember being told union stories, not Andersen's fairy tales. So I knew that we were on the right side and we were there for everybody, and without us, that life would be miserable. So I just never knew any other way. In fact, as I got older, I was shocked to meet people who were against the union. I couldn't understand why. Why would they be against the union? To this day, with all the stuff that was happening in Wisconsin and just how unions are looked at, I'm shocked to this day. I say you have a five-day workweek because of the unions. You have vacations because of the unions. You work only eight hours a day because of the

unions. Somehow people are missing that connection that their life today was very, very impacted by organized labor.

HUNT

Did you know of neighbors or people in town who had jobs other than at the steel mill?

SEWELL

No, no.

HUNT

No one.

SEWELL

Not until I got in high school. When I got in high school is when I noticed class differences. It wasn't till high school and I noticed that there were the rich kids and the kids that weren't rich, and that somehow the rich kids, their parents didn't work in the steel mill or the Ford Motor Company. Their parents owned the businesses. I said, well, that's interesting. And then I started to notice that there were more rich kids in the college-bound classes than not rich kids. Once you start noticing one thing, you start noticing other little funny things. My freshman year I pretty much figured out, ah-oh, there's a big divide that you have been sheltered from, or that you only knew this other way and maybe you weren't being intentionally sheltered from it; you were just not exposed to it.

HUNT

What changed in high school? Were there more students from the different area or—

SEWELL

Well, yes, because it was a brand-new high school. So three schools got combined into this big, giant, beautiful high school, and there were definite, definite, definite lines. In junior high school, anybody could be a cheerleader. In high school, no. You had to be tiny and white and cute and blonde and blue-eyed. I had an English teacher who I was an aide for. His name was Mr. Fain, African American, and he was a member of the Nation of Islam. And he would see those cheerleaders going up and down the aisle, coming to class late, and he'd say, "Look at those blonde-haired, blue-eyed devils sashaying around to get attention from the boys."

[laughs] He'd make all these editorial comments. Of course, I didn't realize that he was editorializing, but I used to really start laughing so much because he would just make all these remarks about all these kids and he would purposely give them a hard time in class.

HUNT

Oh, really?

SEWELL

Yes. He would purposely direct difficult questions to them. I thought it was pretty humorous until I later figured out really what he was doing, that he had a real problem with them.

HUNT

So you think his intentions were—

SEWELL

Oh, his intentions were to make their life miserable. Yes, that was totally his intentions, was to make their life miserable. But, you know, you just start to notice different things in high school.

HUNT

So it sounds like he's a teacher you remember. Were you interested in school? Did you like your teachers?

SEWELL

No, I wasn't interested in school. By the time I was a sophomore, I was bored with school, and by then I had figured out that only so many kids could get into the AP [Advanced Placement] classes, what is AP classes now. It was called something else then; I can't even remember. I was in office practice classes and more clerical kind of classes. I was like, well, you know, how come I'm not in that special history class? I started questioning and never had really satisfactory answers to it. I guess now I didn't complain enough about it to my parents, because I'm sure if I would have, they would have stepped in and taken an issue with it. But I look back now and know that I did not complain about it enough. I started to develop two sets of friends, the "in" kids and then the kids that were considered to be the rowdy kids. So I had a special designation that I was friends with both groups, so I got invited to both parties. I sort of became a party girl in high school.

HUNT

But how did you navigate both groups?

SEWELL

Very well. [laughs] Very well.

HUNT

But what kind of skills or what sorts of things did you have to do to stay in the favor of such different people?

SEWELL

Well, I know that in the more well-to-group, there were certain things you had to do, like the local clothing store that catered to teens had a charm school. So I begged my parents, "Let me go to the charm and modeling school." So I would do things like that. I would figure out what was the thing that they were doing, and so I'd create the situation where I would be there, too. So that made me more acceptable to them also. And the other group was just no problem whatsoever. In fact, I used to get razzed by them, saying, "You're going with your rich friends this week or are you going with us?" [laughs] So I think I learned a lot about social skills from those years and what people on the other side of the fence expect.

HUNT

What did your parents think? What did your parents ultimately want you to do? Did they think school was the largest priority? Did they see your social skills as being a really important part of your development? Where were they at?

SEWELL

I think that they saw both of them as equal. They saw both of them as equal. They felt that in order to get around, you needed to have good social skills, and they felt education was pretty important. But it's really strange because they really never thought about being college-bound.

HUNT

Why do you think that was?

SEWELL

I have no idea why. It was just never anything that we thought about. We never talked about, "Oh, you're going to go to college," or any of that. Never.

HUNT

So if in high school someone were to ask you what do your parents or your grandparents want you to be when you are an adult, what do you think you would have said?

SEWELL

Oh, probably a secretary or something of that nature. Something clerical.

HUNT

And what did you think you wanted to do?

SEWELL

I wanted to be a comedian.

HUNT

Where did that come from?

SEWELL

I have no idea, but that's what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a comedian.

HUNT

Did you do anything that led you in that direction or was it just kind of a pipe dream?

SEWELL

No, what I mean in high school I was always the comedian at the parties and stuff, so I think I got a lot of attention for that, and I was always very quick and quick-witted. So I probably got fed with that idea through that, you know, that one could make a living doing that. But outside of that, no, I really didn't. I belonged to all the regular kind of groups in high school, and then I was real active in Junior Achievement.

HUNT

Did you ever tell your family that you wanted to be a comedian when you grew up?

SEWELL

No, no.

HUNT

How do you think they would have reacted?

SEWELL

That probably would have not been acceptable.

HUNT

Not acceptable because—

SEWELL

Well, I don't know why, but I don't think it would have been.

HUNT

So the things that you were involved with, like Junior Achievement and clubs, did your family support you in doing those things?

SEWELL

Oh, yes, very much supported us in doing that.

HUNT

What kind of activities were you doing with those groups?

SEWELL

Well, I belonged to Junior Achievement all through high school, so I was with that twice a week. I think the Junior Achievement program's a good program because it teaches you a little bit about the basics of business and making a product and then selling a product and then advertising the product and keeping books and all those kinds of things. So I enjoyed that.

HUNT

Did you do actual—

SEWELL

We actually made products.

HUNT

Do you remember any of them?

SEWELL

Yes, we made a keychain that was made of a marble, and you heated the marble in a frying pan and then you dumped it into a bowl of ice and it would crack on the inside. So then you would glue it onto this keychain thing and then you sold the keychains. And then at Christmas we made some kind of note tablet or Rudolph kind of theme on it and, you know, made a birdhouse or just various things. You went out and got orders for them and delivered the product and everything. So, yes, it was a good experience. I liked Junior Achievement a lot.

HUNT

That was a program for both boys and girls?

SEWELL

Both boys and girls, yes.

HUNT

So during middle school, high school, it sounds like you were interested in boys and were dating, meeting people.

SEWELL

Yes, I was interested going to parties, having people over to the house. That was the whole period of the Beatles when they first came here and the whole folk music—what do you call them—Peter, Paul, and Mary, and all those songs and everything. So it was pretty mellow. It was pretty mellow. Yes, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed my high school years.

HUNT

Outside of the organized clubs, when you spent time with friends, you said you kind of became a party girl. What did that mean to you?

SEWELL

Well, I never said no to a party, that's for one. And I was the life of the party, always thinking of things for the group to do so that we just wouldn't all sit around and look at each other.

HUNT

So when you had parties, where were they?

SEWELL

Usually, in the homes in the Midwest, your basement is turned into like what's called a rumpus room or recreation room. So those, they were in the basements, but they were all fixed up like a living room. They had bars in them and everything else. They were very, very nice, very convenient.

HUNT

Were they ever at your house?

SEWELL

Yes, they were at our house. We had a pool table.

HUNT

Oh, I bet that was popular.

SEWELL

Yes, so that was real popular. We had a pool table. It was good clean fun. When I hear now and I see some of the stuff that's on Facebook, I'm just shocked, shocked. My nephew, I became his friend because one of my other relatives said, "Oh, my god, have you seen the stuff he's written on it?" And I said, "No." I said, "Oh, my god, I'll have to ask him to

be a friend, but maybe he'll say no because he won't want me to see it." And, I mean, this boy is seventeen, and it's pretty raw what's on his Facebook. And I'm like, wow, how much things have changed. I can't imagine—what I worry most about is how destructive it is to, whether you're a female or male, self-esteem. I think that whole Facebook thing, that part of it, and what kids feel they have to write about is so destructive to your self-esteem. We didn't face those kinds of things. You were who you were and you tried to do the best that you could, and if you knew how to do something a little bit better, you did it even better so that you could be the best.

HUNT

So it sounds like you were pretty confident as a child and a teenager. What kinds of things were you self-conscious about or what kinds of things did you worry about?

SEWELL

You know, it's really funny. I was overweight but not exceptionally overweight. So my mother was always harping about my weight. I'd say I was probably about fifteen pounds overweight, but it never bothered me and it never prevented me from having dates or guys asking me out or anything. And I wasn't loose. I wasn't known to be going out with them and then making out and stuff like that. So I can't remember anything that really bothered me. I just felt very confident in everything that I did and everything that I tried to do, to the point where, in my senior year, where I challenged my "Problems of Democracy" teacher. We had to give an end-of-the-year report that counted for half your grade for the school year, and I did mine against the war in Vietnam. I was the only person in the classroom who did it against the war in Vietnam.

HUNT

And how did that turn out?

SEWELL

My "Problems of Democracy" teacher was having a fit. It was a funny class because we would meet for half an hour, then we'd break for lunch, then we'd come back. So when we broke for lunch, he wrote all these questions and was

handing them out to my classmates to ask me about my report. I was floored that he would do that. And so then after it was finished with, he would then announce what grade he was giving you in front of everyone. So he announced that he was giving me a D and that I was totally un-American and that I didn't know my place.

HUNT

So his objections weren't necessarily to the quality of your work but your political stance.

SEWELL

Yes, my political views, because I reported on the black market that was happening in the service in Vietnam. I mean, why are all this hairspray and hosiery and all this stuff going there? I mean, certainly our boys weren't wearing it or using it. [laughs] So he took great offense to my report, so I challenged him and said, "If this is a 'Problems of Democracy' class, then the students should have the right to vote on what grade I should get."

HUNT

Interesting. And then what happened?

SEWELL

He said, "Okay, fine. I'll go around the room and ask everyone." And I said, "No. We have to have a secret ballot." So I ended up with an A, because everybody was, like, freaked that I had taken the teacher on. They didn't like him. Nobody liked him anyway, you know. He was a horrid person. I remember he brought a whip to school to show that his great-grandfather had used it on the plantation that they had owned in the South, on the slaves.

HUNT

Wow.

SEWELL

And he was showing it with pride. I remember just being so horrified, and going home and telling my parents that he showed this whip, and my parents filed an objection with the school.

HUNT

Oh, they did?

SEWELL

Yes, they filed an objection with the school. But it was, like, crazy.

HUNT

Do you remember what happened with that?

SEWELL

I think he got reprimanded or something, but he still was who he was. He treated the black kids and the Latino kids very badly. He didn't like us.

HUNT

So it sounds like your parents were advocates for you when certain things were brought to their attention.

SEWELL

Sure.

HUNT

Were you close with your siblings? Did they go to the same schools that you went to and have experiences like yours?

SEWELL

Was I close with them? Yes and no. I had the responsibility. There's very much in our family the pecking order. I was the oldest, so therefore I needed to be the most responsible. So when you're the oldest, that gives you power over your siblings, but it also is a drag because they don't want to listen to you. So it created problems. And I think I'm a Type-A personality anyway, so I probably wasn't very easy on them. So it often created problems and rivalry.

HUNT

So what were some of the expectations that your family or parents had for you as the oldest?

SEWELL

Well, like, you don't talk back. If you get something, you have to make sure that there's enough for anybody else. You know, just the normal kind of things, but sometimes you don't even want to do those normal kind of things. Again, so many things were just a way of life that one doesn't think about it unless you have to really think about it. So I think also an expectation not to bring shame on your family. No matter what you did, you better not bring any shame on your family.

HUNT

And what kinds of things were—

SEWELL

Well, that would be like getting in serious trouble at school, that would be like going out and making a spectacle of yourself. We would have these Mexican dances. You know, behaving yourself at the Mexican dances, not going wild over there, those kinds of things. Always behaving yourself and being on your p's and q's. That was very much expected.

HUNT

Were the dances something that your whole family went to or was it only for the—

SEWELL

The whole family went to them, yes. They were geared towards adults, but because there were so many children, the kids went too. So, you know, we would just be one big family and extended family situations. And then weddings, same thing with the weddings. If you were going to a wedding, behave yourself. You're going to visit somebody, if they offer you something to eat, you can't take it. "Do you want a cookie? "No, I don't want a cookie," you know, even though you did want it. You couldn't have it. You couldn't accept any candy. And they were friends of parents. They were people that we knew. It wasn't that they were concerned we were going to poisoned or something like that. You just did not accept it, because if you accepted it, that meant that your parents couldn't provide it. So you didn't do it.

HUNT

Were there other activities that you enjoyed doing with your family or your siblings?

SEWELL

We went on a lot of picnics, a lot of picnics in the summertime, a lot of them, and went to the lake a lot. We were close to Lake Erie.

HUNT

Okay. I actually grew up on Lake Erie also.

SEWELL

So we did the whole Lake Erie thing.

HUNT

Did you feel like your family and the way you spent time with your family or interacted with your family was the same as your friends' experiences with their families?

SEWELL

Pretty much. Yes, pretty much. There were some families that were single families, but they were very rare, very rare, very rare. But when we went to Lake Erie, the other people were there, too, you know. I just always say it was a fifties kind of life.

HUNT

So going back to some of the things related to school, it sounds like you were engaged with school, but maybe it wasn't your favorite thing. Were there things that you did like about school or certain subjects you liked?

SEWELL

I mean, I liked my history and I liked English class, but outside of that, no, I didn't like school at all. In fact, in my senior year I never went a day to the class except for the — I'll take that back, except for my "Problems of Democracy" class. That's the only one I went to. I didn't go. I didn't go to school. I skipped school all the time. I went to a pool hall, or I—both my parents worked or I stayed home. They had no idea, none whatsoever, that I was not going to school.

HUNT

And what didn't you like about school?

SEWELL

I thought it was boring. I thought it was absolutely the most boring thing on Earth, and I really didn't feel like it was filling any of my needs, or I think maybe by then I was sort of figuring out that my life would be getting married and going to the stock car races, and somehow that was frightening me that that would be my life and my big joy in life would be having a big wedding. It was like, oh, no, there must be more to life than that. So I just didn't go. It wasn't until a month before I was supposed to graduate that my parents found out that I wasn't graduating. I had intercepted all the letters that had come from the school to the house because both my parents worked, and I had a whole scam going.

HUNT

So what happened when they finally found out?

SEWELL

They were very disappointed, very disappointed. My dad sat down with me and then we went to the school. It's the only time my dad ever missed work. He went to school and asked to speak to the principal, and then asked if he could speak to the superintendent of schools, and wouldn't leave until they brought the superintendent of schools down from the main headquarters, and said, "It's the school's fault. It's your fault because you weren't giving her what she needs. Why in the world would somebody not go to school unless it wasn't fulfilling them? And it was your responsibility. I pay my taxes. It was your responsibility to ensure that she get an education and that she be happy here." They went around and around in circles and tried to blame my parents and said, "Well, we sent you letters." But my dad just held his guns. So an agreement was made that if I could pass all my exams with a B or better, that they would allow me to graduate. So that's how I graduated, because I passed all the exams. So it was, like, okay.

HUNT

Were you nervous that you wouldn't pass or were you pretty confident that everything would work out?

SEWELL

I don't think I cared. You know, I don't remember being nervous about it. I don't remember being upset about it. So all I can say is, I probably didn't care.

HUNT

So it probably just wasn't important? You didn't see the value in it? What was it?

SEWELL

I think I probably didn't see the value in it, because then what was I going to do with it? You know, I mean, it was, like, I wasn't going to college, so I was, like, okay, you really don't need a high school diploma to get married or to work in the store. You know, I had not been offered enough options or even told that there were options when I was in high school. And I'd say if there were any failures of my parents, that was their failure in our education, was that with me they

hadn’t thought about options and gearing us that way. The other ones got more geared that way; my siblings, they got geared that way. I didn’t get geared that way.

HUNT

So what do you wish they would have taught you or offered you as potential things for your future?

SEWELL

Well, you know what? I’m a sort of a person that believes—I’m very much a person that believes OJT, on-the-job training, and I’m pretty much a person that believes if you’re going to be successful, you’re going to be successful. So I don’t have any wish that I wish this or I wish that. I took the cards I took and played them and did the best job that I could.

HUNT

And how were things different for your siblings?

SEWELL

More attention was paid to what options they would have for further schooling and what they needed to do to prepare for that further schooling. My sister and my brother right after me, they didn’t graduate from college, but my younger brother, he graduated from college and went on to law school and everything. So by the time they got to him, they pretty much knew every trick in the book and everything they needed to do.

HUNT

Do you think that the options given to your siblings were the same for your sisters and your brothers, or were there any gender differences?

SEWELL

I think there were gender differences, but they were mostly in extracurricular activities. Like music, you know, we weren’t offered to have music lessons, but the boys were offered to have music lessons. We didn’t play organized sports, but the boys played organized sports. So those kind of things. So when they were happening, it was, like, I really didn’t want to play baseball, so you didn’t really think any other kind of sports.

HUNT

Were things different for you and your sister versus your brothers with regard to expectations for what you need to do at home or how you were to behave?

SEWELL

My sister's extremely good-looking. She's a real good-looking gal. And so the feeling was always that she would get by on her looks and that I would get by on my brains. So, you know, there was also that. You know, "You're smart. You'll get by because you're smart. She's pretty. She'll get by because she's pretty." So I think that, to this day, is a common thread in the family. You know, it's like, a whole lot wasn't expected from her at all. She's hitting sixty now and she just lost her job and has no prospects, has been working since she was eighteen and never saved a penny, and married a guy and he never saved a penny either, you know, and it's like, oooh, it's sort of scary.

HUNT

What about your brothers?

SEWELL

My brother right after me owns the small company Edible Eats, that fruit company where they make floral designs out of fruit and you eat it, and then my younger brother's an attorney and has his own law firm.

HUNT

So did the outcomes or the lives of your siblings surprise you at all?

SEWELL

Yes, my younger brother. My younger brother's very conservative, very conservative, anti-union, anti everything. Everything that we were for, he's against. He's like the oddity in the family.

HUNT

How do you think that happened?

SEWELL

When he was in high school and he was going to college, he got accepted to General Motors Institute, and I think going there and working there for General Motors really gave him a skewed view on things. That's when all his conservatism began to form really heavily. There's huge differences in him

and how he looks at life and how he looks at women and how he looks at his own children. As he would say, he was cursed with having three daughters. He had no sons. So we all think that's pretty funny, because he doesn't have a high opinion of women and that's what he ended up having, three girls, and he never encouraged any of them to do anything. They're young ladies today and he employs all three of them and they all live under his thumb. They have no possibility of a future whatsoever and they've all made very bad personal life decisions. That's sort of what goes around comes around, you know. You help make your bed. They helped make their bed and so you guys have to lie in it, and, fortunately, his law firm's done very well. He's very well-to-do and so he's able to provide for his children, but they live in homes that he bought them, beautiful homes, and they drive cars that he bought them, but they can't work themselves out of a paper bag. I mean, sooner or later he's going to die if he doesn't have a heart attack, and what are they going to be left with? Sure, they'll be left with some money, but they'll be the ones that spend it right away and end up with nothing. So it's sad, it's real sad to see that my nieces are totally airheads, total airheads. It's like, wow. But, you know, I think that he and I are considered to be the most alike of the siblings. We're both very determined, very both self-directed, and both very bright. He'll say that he is so smart that he's gone around the circle ten times. And while I'm pretty smart, I've gone around twice, and our siblings, they can't even make it out of the first fifteen minutes. [laughter] So he's pretty funny too. He just gave his daughter a big $80,000 wedding, and it was ridiculous.

HUNT

Are you in regular contact with your siblings now? Are you close or—

SEWELL

I'm close to my sister, but to my brothers, no, not that close. To the one brother that has Edible Eats, yes, I see him a few times a year. He lives in Ontario. Then the other lives in San Bernardino, the attorney, but it's by choice that I don't see him.

HUNT

So, thinking back to—you passed your exams. You're a high school graduate. What changed? What was different after high school?

SEWELL

They opened a community college. It had been open one year, and I decided that I should go to the community college. You know, that was the closest I was going to get to college. So my parents said, "Okay, but you have to go into medical assistant." I couldn't pick what I wanted to do. They were picking what I wanted to do.

HUNT

And why did they choose medical assistant?

SEWELL

Because they felt that that would be a good career to go into. Who knows? So I said, "Yes, yes, okay, fine." And I didn't like it one bit, so I lasted one semester or one quarter. I forget if it was on the quarter or semester. I went in in September, got in, came out for the holidays, and left in January of that year. I left permanently Ohio, packed up my bags, didn't tell my parents, put myself on a bus, and came to California.

HUNT

Where did that come from or how did you—how did you decide to leave?

SEWELL

I had an aunt and uncle who lived here in Pasadena, in Altadena, actually, my mother's brother. I just decided that would be a good place to go.

HUNT

What were your expectations for what California or what Southern California would be like?

SEWELL

I didn't have any expectations. I really didn't. It was just—sounded like that would be good.

HUNT

So you weren't necessarily looking for anything in particular?

SEWELL

No, I wasn't looking for anything in particular. I wasn't looking for the California dream or the sunshine or the beach or any of those kind of things at all, nothing, the music, none of that. In fact, I didn't like West Coast music at all. It was just getting away, leaving. I was just so horrified that my life was going to be planned out. I was still going to end up going to stock car races and still end up getting married and having four kids and not accomplished anything in my life. I just would have nightmares about it. I just found it so awful. It was, like, scary.

HUNT

Wow. So how did you get to California?

SEWELL

On a bus.

HUNT

How long did that take? Do you remember much of the trip?

SEWELL

Yes, I do. I remember it perfectly. It took two and a half days. It took two and a half days. I never got off the bus for fear that my father would be at the next bus stop and get me by the hair and give me a good whipping and throw me in the car and drive me back. So I never got off the bus for the whole time.

HUNT

Wow.

SEWELL

Ended up in L.A. at the Greyhound bus station, and called my aunt and uncle and said, "I'm here."

HUNT

And what did they say? Was it a surprise to them also?

SEWELL

Yes, that was a surprise to them because nobody knew where I was, because I didn't let anybody know. My sister said they were, "Where is she? Where she is?" "I don't know. She didn't tell me. She didn't tell me." I didn't tell anybody, didn't tell my friends, didn't tell anybody.

HUNT

What do you think was the biggest reason you didn't tell anyone?

SEWELL

They would tell.

HUNT

So you were worried that your parents would find out.

SEWELL

Yes, yes, yes. You know, they would tell. Then my dad would for sure be there at the bus station.

HUNT

So you call your aunt and uncle—

SEWELL

And say, "I'm here."

HUNT

—and somebody picks up the phone.

SEWELL

And they pick me up and they say, "Okay. Well, you have to call your parents." And I said, "Okay." So I called my parents, and my dad then was, like, furious at me, furious, and said, "You're going to amount to nothing. You're going to end up cleaning toilets." And he wouldn't speak to me. He didn't speak to me for about a year.

HUNT

Wow.

SEWELL

Just wouldn't speak to me. The funny thing is that I got a job at an insurance company in downtown L.A., and I had to take three buses every day to get to work. Then that summer I worked for an anti-poverty program in Pasadena, the Martin Luther King Westside Study Center. No, that was a year later. I did that a year later. We had an old abandoned motel that we were turning into a summer school for kids in the neighborhood, and I remember cleaning the toilets and my father's voice coming out of the toilet bowl. [laughter]

HUNT

He was right, almost.

SEWELL

I'm like, oh, my god. I'm cleaning toilets like he said.

HUNT

So your first job was in insurance.

SEWELL

An insurance company.

HUNT

How did you get that job?

SEWELL

I looked up an ad that I seen. It was an employment agency. I went there and took a test, and they sent me out and I got hired. It was pretty easy.

HUNT

And then when you started working for this anti-poverty campaign, was that a new job or was that volunteering?

SEWELL

That was a new job. It was between jobs. That was the summer of ’68.

HUNT

And what was that like? It sounds like you were doing a lot of different things.

SEWELL

Well, I had been real involved with the [Robert F.] Kennedy campaign. Then with the two assassinations, Martin Luther King in April and Robert Kennedy in June, you know, there was a lot of feeling that you had to do something. So I had read about this brand-new agency, the Martin Luther King Westside Study Center, was going to open up a summer program for kids, so I went down, signed up, and got hired.

HUNT

So it sounds like it was pretty natural for you to just jump right in and get involved with politics and get involved with activism and things like that.

SEWELL

Right. As soon as I came to California, I joined the Young Democrats and became involved with politics and stuff here. It was just a natural course.

HUNT

Did you feel like things were really different on the West Coast? You mentioned that you weren’t into the music; you felt like that was different from what you were used to. What kinds of things surprised you? What kinds of contrasts did you notice?

SEWELL

First of all, I noticed that I was being treated differently. You know, being Mexican American at that time, there were Mexican Americans, but not to the numbers that there are now. There was a little bit of outwardly prejudice, so that was a surprise to me.

HUNT

So you felt like things were less comfortable here than—

SEWELL

Less comfortable in that portion. The openness of the whole society, I thought, was weird. You know, I thought the whole hippie thing and all that was just, like, oh, these people are so weird. You know, they're, like, weird. It was weird. But it was exciting too. Then early on, I met my husband [Mario Sewell] at a Peace and Freedom [Party] meeting. As a Young Democrat, I went to a Peace and Freedom meeting, and I met my to-be husband there. Then we started dating. He was a lefty-lefty-lefty-lefty, and so, you know, we started going to all the traditional California things at that time, love-ins and peace-ins and all those things. So I went with the flow. It was fun. It was fun. But I remember that one date we went to hear Janis Joplin and [Big Brother and] the Holding Company, I guess it was called then. I didn't know who she was. I was raised with Motown, and so I had no—I mean, it was, like, who the hell is she? And my husband was all excited. It was at the Shrine Auditorium. We weren't married then, so he came to pick me up. He said, "We're going to go dancing and we're going to hear this great singer, Janis Joplin." Somehow I got it that we were going to, in my mind, what was a traditional dance. Back East and Midwest, when you went dancing, you got dressed up even to go to hear a Motown group, I mean, with the cute little sixties outfits and everything. And so he came to pick me up and he had cut-offs on and gladiator sandals and this tie-dyed t-shirt on, and I was, like, oh my god. And I had this little black dress on, I remember. I remember getting scared. I think it was, like, our second date and telling him, "You have to leave your license number and everything down here for my aunt because they won't allow me to go out unless

they have the license number of somebody." I made something up on the spot, and he left it. We went and it was a shrine. There were all these trash cans on the stage that was burning incense, and all these weird movies being shown of amoebas and cells and all kinds of things, you know, and different colors like you were on some trip. I remember going into the restroom and there were all these women in the restroom, young girls like me, in the restroom, all looking at themselves in the mirror and all acting weird, and the restroom really smelling weird. It was grass, you know, but I didn't know that's what it was. I remember coming out and feeling like I was going to have a headache and feeling, like, nauseous. I went to my date and I said to him, "Mario," I said to him, "we have to go. This place is too weird. I don't like this place. I don't like how strange these people are." And he said, "But Janis Joplin's going to be on." "I don't care who's on. We're leaving." So to this day, he tells me I messed up his one opportunity to see Janis Joplin because we left. You know, it took me a while to get into—I really didn't get into it, but to open my mind to music other than Motown, any of the hard music at that time. I was just not—I was pretty closed to it. To me it didn't sound like music.

HUNT

Do you remember when you figured out that people were under the influence of drugs or what was making it such a weird—

SEWELL

Well, when I told my husband—well, again, he was my date then—when I said, "All these girls were in there and it smelled so badly," and he was laughing, laughing. He said, "They were smoking grass." And I was saying, "Why would they want to smoke grass?" I thought literally people were smoking grass from the lawn. I was that out of it. He said, "No. Marijuana." And I said, "Marijuana? Oh, my god." Because I had seen that film in school, you know, Reefer Madness. I had seen that in school in Ohio. So I was just, like, floored, absolutely floored, absolutely floored. To this day, I never, ever, ever, ever have smoked marijuana.

HUNT

But it was just a big shock that it was so open, that there were so many people who were just—

SEWELL

Yes, I mean, it was just like no big deal. It was weird. [laughs]

HUNT

I can imagine. So eventually you came to terms with this was just kind of how things were on the scene. Was that something that—your date's name was Mario?

SEWELL

Mario.

HUNT

Was he involved with that scene or was it just like one part of what he liked doing?

SEWELL

I think part of him was involved with it. He's ten years older than I am, so here I am nineteen and he's twenty-nine, and he's been around, you know, and he already has two graduate degrees and he's single and he's a Stanford [University] graduate, University of Chicago graduate, USC [University of Southern California] graduate, and he'd been around. He had served in Vietnam. He'd been to Europe a number of times. He would always say, "You can take the girl out of the small town, but you can't take the small town out of the girl." He would always tell me that.

HUNT

Did you think that's kind of true?

SEWELL

Yes, I think it is, even today. Occasionally, when I get horrified by something like Facebook, he'll say, "Gee whiz."

HUNT

Right. So how long were you in Los Angeles before you met him?

SEWELL

Let's see. I came in '67, January of '67, and I met him around July of '67, and then he took off to go to Mexico to teach Berlitz [language training] in Mexico. Invited me to come with him, and I was horrified. I was like, "What? What do you mean, go with you and stay with you?"

HUNT

How long had you known him at that time?

SEWELL

Probably about four months. I said, "No, I'm not that kind of person. I'm not going to go do that." So he took someone else. [laughs] It was funny.

HUNT

Wow. So early on, knowing him, meeting him, what were your first impressions? What did you think?

SEWELL

That he was smart. That he was smart. I was always impressed by how smart he was, and how well educated he was and how worldly he was. All those were big turn-ons to me. "My god, he's been everywhere. He's done so many things." That was my initial attraction to him.

HUNT

And were his interests similar to yours, outside of the music world, perhaps? Was he into politics?

SEWELL

Yes, he was interested in politics, but more to the left than I was, much more to the left. Yes, we had very similar interests and very similar moral beliefs. He's Mexican American also, and I was shocked to find out he was Mexican American because he's six-foot-three and had green eyes and lighter-color hair, and he was fair and his last name was Sewell. And I was like, "No, you're not. You can't be." But he had been adopted by his stepfather, so his name went from Oroczo to Sewell.

HUNT

And what were your expectations for your friendship or relationship when you first met him?

SEWELL

I didn't have any expectations. I'm pretty much a person that takes things as they come, and so it was like—like when he said, "Well, come and stay with me," and I said, "No, I'm not going to stay with you." And then he said, "Well, I'm going to take someone else." I said, "Okay, go ahead, take someone else. I'm not going to die over it. Have a good time."

HUNT

So he went to Mexico to teach. How long was he there?

SEWELL

He was there four months and then he came back.

HUNT

And when he came back, were you a couple, were you friends, were you dating?

SEWELL

Yes, we were dating. We started dating again. I was exclusive to him. I don't believe he was exclusive with me because, you know, he'd been around. He wasn't going to wait for some little virgin here to make up her mind what she was going to do, so I'm pretty sure he wasn't—he's not one that discusses past affairs or past loves or anything. I'll say, "Well, when we were dating, I knew you were dating so-and-so." And he'll say, "Well, I'm glad you know that." [laughs] He will not discuss it under any circumstances.

HUNT

Was your age difference something that you were both really aware of or did it not seem to be—

SEWELL

Not seem to be an issue, because there was ten years' difference between my parents, so I didn't see it as any big deal.

HUNT

So how did things progress to you ending up being married?

SEWELL

Well, actually, he was here when I went through the whole depression with the two assassinations and some aftermath from the [Senator Robert F.] Kennedy assassination, and I ended up getting pregnant, so I was concerned about that. I made an arrangement with a friend of mine to go to Tijuana to get an abortion. I didn't tell him. So it was a Thursday and I was supposed to go on Saturday to Tijuana to get an abortion, and so we went out that Thursday night and he said, "You know, I just think it's time for me to get married, and we should get married." I was like, "Uh, well, I have something to tell you." And he said, "What?" I said, "I'm pregnant and I'm going to get an abortion on Saturday." And

he said, "Why? I always wanted to be a father. Why in the world would you want to get an abortion?" I said, "Well, I didn't know you were going to ask me to get married." And he said, "No, no, we're going to get married." I said, "Well, I don't want you to feel like you have to get married." And he said, "I didn't even know you were pregnant, so you know I asked you because I wanted to." And I said, "Well, but I don't know. I don't think so, because I don't want you ever throwing it up to my face." And he says, "What kind of person do you think I am? I'm never going to throw it to your face. I always wanted to be a father." So that's what happened.

HUNT

Wow.

SEWELL

That was in July. We were married in September.

HUNT

So what were your feelings about everything kind of happening all at once like that?

SEWELL

Well, I was happy. I mean, I was afraid about getting an abortion, but I knew that I had to, you know. And then so we were engaged, and then, like, the week we were going to get married, September—we got married September 6th. This is '69. He called me up at work and said, "Oh, I need to talk to you." I said, "Okay, fine." So picked me up and he said, "I don't want to get married." And I'm like, "What? I just made you $250 to get your transmission fixed and your car fixed up, and you don't want to marry me? Are you out of your mind? Give me my money back." [laughs] He said, "Well, I don't have the money." I said, "Well, I want my money back. Fine, fine, but can I ask you why you don't want to get married all of a sudden?" He said, "Well, I don't hear any bells ringing." And I'm like, "You're thirty years old and you're talking about hearing bells? Are you out of your fuckin' mind? No, you're not a young kid. You're not a teenager that you're going to hear wedding bells and everything else. You want to hear bells? I'll go across the street to that church and ask them to ring the damn bell for

you." And he said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I said, "Just take me home. I'm disgusted." So I just went home, and that Friday night—we hadn't planned a big wedding. We invited just about twenty people. It was going to be at my aunt's house after the church, and my aunt had planned, like, a get-together that night, that Friday night. So Mario came for it and I'm like, "Well, what the hell are you doing here?" And he said, "Well, you know, I have to tell your aunt and uncle." I said, "Don't worry about it. I'll tell them." And he said, "No, no, no, no, no. I changed my mind. I do want to get married." And I'm like, "Well, make up your mind. Are you going to get married or don't want to get married?" "No, no, no, I do. I don't know what came over me. I just got cold feet. I got scared." And I'm like, "Ay, yi, yi, yi, yi. Okay." So the next day at the church, at Throop Memorial Church here in Pasadena, we were there. They had to ask me three times before I would say yes. [laughs]

HUNT

And was that a conscious decision?

SEWELL

Yes, it was. It was conscious. I did it on purpose. I knew he was all nervous. He lived in Hollywood. He came all the way to Pasadena, had his suit on and everything, and he didn't have his shoes on. He forgot to put his shoes on, so he had to go back in his car, go all the back, get his shoes and come back. And there in the ceremony I said, "Oh, okay."

HUNT

How did he react when he had to wait to hear?

SEWELL

Everybody was like, "Oh," and his sister was our maid of honor. She's elbowing me and everything, and I'm like—just, like, trying to make up my mind. Am I? Am I not? Am I? Am I not? Am I ? Am I not? And then I finally said, "Well, okay." [laughs] That was it. We're going to celebrate forty-two years of marriage in September. [laughs]

HUNT

Does that story come up much?

SEWELL

Oh, yes. It comes up all the time, yes. [laughs]

HUNT

So marriage sounds like it was something that you always thought was going to be a part of your life, but in some ways it's not all you wanted.

SEWELL

Well, I certainly didn't want to be pregnant, but I was pregnant. I mean, what are you going to do? I passed my opportunity for an abortion, so it was like, "Okay, now you've got to find a real job," because he was student teaching. It was like, "You've got to find a real job."

HUNT

What were your expectations then? Like, how did you think the marriage was going to work? How did you think your family was going to function before it really got going, before your child was born?

SEWELL

I don't know. We lived in a tree house in Hollywood. He lived in a tree house, an actual tree house. It had plumbing and everything, but it was built in a tree.

HUNT

Wow.

SEWELL

It was more like a bachelor kind of pad, you know. So I don't know. I just figured we'd make it. We'd figure it out. It was more important that he find a job. I was working, but it was like, "Well, I'm not going to be working, having this kid and everything, so you've got to go and find a job."

HUNT

And your wedding, you said you only had about twenty people there.

SEWELL

Right.

HUNT

Who did you invite to the wedding?

SEWELL

Well, it was my uncle and my aunt, and then some people that we had met, and the sister and his mother and his stepfather and his grandmother and a friend of mine from Ohio who lived here in California, a small handful of people.

HUNT

And what did your family think of—

SEWELL

My parents didn't come for it. Nobody expressed how they felt or anything. It was like, "Okay, that's what you're doing. Go ahead and do it." I think people pretty much figured out I was going to do what I wanted to do. There was no talking me into something or talking me out of it. If I made up my mind I was going to do it, I was going to do it, so I think people pretty much accepted that.

HUNT

Did you have fears or concerns about what might happen next?

SEWELL

No.

HUNT

Why do you think you didn't? Was it just a confidence in—

SEWELL

Yes, I think it was—I mean, first of all, he was educated, so eventually he had to find a job that paid a pretty decent salary. He was smart. He wasn't dumb and I wasn't dumb, so I figured it would all work out. Somehow or another it was all going to work out.

HUNT

Excellent.

SEWELL

I wasn't fearful at all, wasn't fearful.

HUNT

Okay. I think we'll stop for now and we'll come back to this next time. [End of April 7, 2011 interview]

1.2. Session Two
April 22, 2011

HUNT

This is Jackie Hunt in Pasadena, California. Today is April 22, 2011, and I'm here with Sandra Serrano Sewell for session two of an oral history interview. So, Sandra, going back from our last discussion, you alluded to some of your political

involvement, specifically that you helped to work on Robert [F.] Kennedy's presidential campaign, I believe?

SEWELL

Yes, it was.

HUNT

Can you talk about how you got involved with that?

SEWELL

In 1965, our family took a family vacation to Washington, D.C., and we went to the Senate Building, and we were waiting outside an elevator without realizing that that elevator was for senators only. So we're waiting, and there was an elevator operator and we noticed he would tell people to come in. We didn't realize the people that were going in were either staff or senators, and so we were like, "Why can't we go in?" We didn't pay attention to the sign. So Senator Robert Kennedy went on, and he noticed our family and he said, "Are you waiting to use the elevator?" Then the elevator operator decided, oh, that was the time he'd pay attention to us and said, "Well, this is for senators only and their staff." So Robert Kennedy said, "They're my guests," so we went into the elevator. And we still didn't get it. We still didn't get it, you know. We were, like, sort of stunned. So he got out of the elevator and then asked us what we wanted to see, and we said, "Well, we were just exploring." So he made a recommendation of what to see in the Senate Building, and then he said goodbye, and that was that. So when I got home—I was going to be a senior in high school that September, and so I wrote him a letter and thanked him for letting our family on the elevator. I said, "If you ever run for president, I will be working for you. I'll volunteer for you." So I was living here in California when he was running for the primary. I was dating my husband, who was not my husband at that time, who was for [Eugene J.] Gene McCarthy, and I said, no, no, I had to be for Robert Kennedy because I had made that promise. I believed in my mind that he and Gene McCarthy were equal candidates, so it wasn't a tough decision. I didn't feel like I was betraying any deep thoughts or any alliances or allegiance. So I heard in March that he was going to appear at Olvera Street. I didn't drive at that

time, so I had to take four buses in order to get from Altadena [California] to Olvera Street in Los Angeles because I wanted to see him. So I got on my four buses and I went there, and he was going through Main Street. Right when I got off the bus, he was coming off Main Street, and so I walked up to Main Street and seen him and took some photographs, and then walked over to Olvera Street and managed to work my way up to the bandstand and got some really great photographs. I remember I was so struck by the fact that there were so many Mexican Americans there, and I was still adjusting to the fact, being from Ohio and not seeing very many Mexican or Mexican Americans, coming to California and seeing so many more, but not like you see now. It was noticeable, but it wasn't overwhelming like it is now. So I was just sort of struck by that. Then he got up and gave a speech and he talked about that he, the week prior or something, had been with Cesar Chavez and his food strike, his hunger strike, and he had joined him for that. So the crowd went wild. I mean, I just thought he was a really great speaker and I was very moved by him. but I was much more moved by how he moved the group, the people that were assembled, and in my observations that this was somebody that they could really believe in, and wondering at that time was it because of his brother's [John F. Kennedy] legacy or was it because of him coming from seeing Cesar Chavez and the whole [Delano] grape strike was just in the midst, or was it just because it was him, or was it a combination of it all? So I decided, well, this was the guy that I was going to support. So when they opened the Pasadena headquarters in April, I went and volunteered after work. I was working downtown Los Angeles and so I'd go every day after work. Pasadena, at that time, the dominant minority was African Americans. It's really strange, and I thought it was strange then that the people that were in charge didn't have any feelings or acted like the Mexican American vote didn't mean anything. Well, at that time it really didn't, but I remember that it really pissed me off. It really pissed me off that I realized that this was going to be a strong voting bloc at some time, coming from the Midwest and coming here, and

seeing, just seeing that there were so many and that we had a high birth rate, that people were not investing in what was going to be the future. I tried expressing that and telling people that at the headquarters and that we had to do some outreach, and they said, "Well, we're going to do a Viva Kennedy thing. It's coming out of the Los Angeles headquarters." And I said, "You know, we're not an experiment. We're here to stay and we have to be part of the mainstream." So there was the Students for Kennedy and it was headed by a young fellow by the name of Richard Felton, who was, I believe, going to Occidental [College] at that time. He was going to some college. I think it was Occidental, because he used to come every day, too. So I couldn't be part of that group because I wasn't a student and they had an age restriction. You had to be eighteen to, like, twenty-two, so he was really targeting the college crowd. And I remember getting really annoyed by it and saying, "Well, I think there should be something else." So they just got tired of me harping about it and they said, "Well, like what?" And I said, "Well, like the Youth for Kennedy or something." And they said, "No, no, you can't do that. You can't do that." So I remember getting so ticked off at it and so ticked off at the organizers of the Pasadena headquarters, both of whom were two wealthy white liberal women, that I called the DNC in Washington, D.C., Democratic National Committee, and made a complaint and said, "Why can't there be a Youth for Kennedy?" They said, "There is. They're in many states and many cities, and all you have to do is get together some people and form a group and do it." I said, "Okay." So I went back to the headquarters and I said, "Well, I called the DNC." And they were shocked that I had called the DNC. I was not even twenty-one. I think I was, what, nineteen? I think I was nineteen. And they were like, "How could you call the DNC? How dare you call the DNC? Did you say it was Pasadena? You're going to get us all in trouble." And I'm like, "Why? Why should I get you in trouble? I mean, if you're going to get in trouble, it's because you were so closed-minded. How can I, who am nobody, get you in trouble?" So then I told this Richard Felton, and he

said, "Oh, no, you can't. We have the students and that's it already." I said, "But there's many of us that are not students." "Well, go ahead, fine. You won't get anybody." So they were banking that I wasn't going to get anybody, but I had figured it out that there were more young adults that were not students in college than there were young adults that were students. So I said, "Okay, I'm going to make my age thing from eighteen to twenty-six," because his was to twenty-two, the age group, so I knew right then and there I had a larger pool to pull from. So, sure enough, it ended up being a bigger group than the Students for Kennedy, which pissed them all off, like major pissed them off. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was like a strategic kind of move because I didn't think of it that way. I just thought of something that would involve more people and something that would give more people the opportunity. I really didn't think, okay, strategically, I'm going to make it a higher age. No, it turned out that way. So anyway, that's how I ended up getting involved and headed up a caravan that went to East Los Angeles to Belvedere Junior High School, where they had a Get out the Vote training. That's when the new voting machines came out, because before then it was with your pencil, and now it was going to be—no, it was by levers, and now it was going to be punching, the kind we use now today. So I went to that, and Joan [B.] Kennedy spoke and the astronaut, [M. Scott] Carpenter's wife spoke. It was a really, really, really good event, and I was very happy and very proud of the work that I had done. So [Eugene J.] Gene McCarthy won the Oregon primary, which really freaked out the Kennedy people because they expected that he would win the Oregon primary. And so what they decided, the campaign, I guess, somewhere decided that they would hold a standing-room-only event, one in San Francisco and one in Los Angeles, for Kennedy supporters, the volunteers, to sort of rev them up, and since Los Angeles was filled with so many celebrities, that they would draw upon the celebrity community to be part of this event. So all the volunteers got to go for—tickets were three dollars, and there was something like fifteen-thousand people at the Sports Arena

in Los Angeles. A similar event was held in San Francisco with Jefferson Airplane and those San Francisco-type groups. Here it was Sonny and Cher, and Andy Williams and Rosey Grier and Mahalia Jackson and Carol Channing and Shirley MacLaine and all these different Hollywood groups, and they were all performing and it was really a very neat event. Well, because I was head of Youth for Kennedy, certain people had these backstage passes. So I had a pass backstage, but just before, about five minutes or ten minutes before Kennedy was going to enter the backstage area to go on to address the audience, they cleared us out and they told us we had to go sit down. So I was sort of like taking my time and, like, trying not to be too obvious, but finally somebody said, "You just have to go sit down," one of the [United States] Secret Service. So I left the area, but you couldn't just go from the stage to the audience. You had to go around the corner through a door that put you in a hallway, okay? Well, since I had taken so long to do all that, so I was just sort of annoyed that I didn't get to stay onstage, and I was in the hallway, well, he must have taken, like, five minutes or ten minutes—that would have been long—probably about five minutes to address the group. It was a real quick appearance, just to get everybody a taste. And when I was just getting ready to enter the assembly area, he was coming out with the Secret Service people, and I said, "Oh, my god, you spoke already?" And he looked and said, "Yes." I said, "Ah." And I said, "Can I have your speech?" And he said, "Yes," and he gave me his speech.

HUNT

Wow.

SEWELL

So, you know, I was all jazzed, and then the speech had his handwriting where he had crossed out the typewritten words. It was, like, one-inch typewriter words high and the speech was five pages—no, it was four pages, and then two pages of the program reverse side that he had written on. And it was from that work of literature that, "No man is an island," blah, blah, blah, and then "For whom the bells toll" and whatever. So I had it, and I was just all jazzed about it. I remember

going the next day to the headquarters and say, "Look what I got." And everyone just like, "How in the world did you get that?" I said, "I asked him for it." "What do you mean you asked him for it?" So when I told everybody how I had gotten it, they all looked at it and they said, "Oh, my god." That was ten days before he was assassinated. So I had kept it all these years. Just April 4th of this year was my son's birthday. He turned forty, and he's been politically active in San Francisco since he went up to college there and worked for Willie [L.] Brown [Jr.], and has worked as an attorney with the city attorney's office and is working on his boss' race for mayor, Dennis Herrera. So my son's been very politically involved. So for his birthday I gave him a notebook that I put together with all my Robert Kennedy memorabilia, which I have a lot of, and the letter that Kennedy wrote back to me when I wrote him, thanking him for letting us go on the elevator that went back to 1965, letters that I'd gotten from the campaign, a letter that we sent out to the campaign workers after Kennedy was assassinated, and, of course, the speech, and newspapers that were done by the campaign talking about that as our event. So my son was just floored. He knew that the speech existed, but I never let him see it. I never let anybody touch it. Actually, I put it away years and years ago and I knew where it was all the time. I had it in a bin. Really what happened is that my daughter lives in a house we own in Pasadena and one of their pipes broke in the basement, and so the basement got flooded. So that bin, that plastic bin, was one of the bins that was down there, but since it was in a plastic bin, it didn't get any damage whatsoever. So when I was going through the bins, the bin was marked "Kennedy," and I knew immediately what that bin had in it. So I just put it all together and gave it to him, and he was absolutely thrilled by it. So that's basically what happened. A side story, which is not pleasant, was I was there the night of the assassination. I rarely talk about this. I gave an interview to the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] four years ago. At the time, I was sitting out on the fire escape because it had gotten very hot in the hall and the ballroom at the Ambassador [Hotel], and I saw three

people, a man and two women, come up the stairs and enter the hall. Then about twenty minutes later, the woman and one of the men came running down and pushed me out of the way, and I said, "What's wrong?" They said, "We shot the senator. We shot the senator." And I said, "What?" So I went in the hall, and it was crazed, chaos, chaos like crazy. So I found my friend that I had gone to the event with and I said, "Well, you know, the weirdest thing happened that these people, I seen them, and this is what they said." And as I was telling her, a city deputy attorney was standing in the same area. His name was [John] Ambrose, and he said, "What? What are you saying?" I didn't know who he was, and I just told him, and he said, "Come with me," and before you know it, I'm in a holding room with other people. No, before that I was walking and I was stopped. He went up to Sander Vanocur. He was, like, a commentary person, did news commentary and current events commentary, Sander Vanocur, and he interviewed me and I said what I saw. I said, "I don't know, but I believe the guys were Mexican American," because they looked Mexican American to me. And then I got whisked away and I ended up spending the whole night at the Ambassador being questioned by the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department], various people from the LAPD, and describing the woman who had a polka-dot dress on. So, of course, it became instant news. When I went home the next day—I lived in Altadena, and as it turned out, unbeknownst to my aunt and uncle whom I lived with, we lived two blocks from Sirhan Sirhan, which we had no idea that we lived two blocks from him.

HUNT

When you came inside and you told your friend what happened and then you encountered the reporter who wanted to talk to you and then the official who wanted to talk to you, were you aware of what had happened, or was it still just that you saw this chaotic scene and then—

SEWELL

Yes, I knew by then. Yes, by then I knew why all the chaos, you know, because he had been shot.

HUNT

And what was the feeling then? Was it that he was gone or did people think he might be okay?

SEWELL

I think it was just disbelief. It was disbelief. And I remember before—no, after I'd seen my friend, we passed a phone booth before we ran into this deputy D.A. [District Attorney] guy, that I called my parents in Ohio and told my parents, "I'm here at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, and everything's crazy here and they say they shot Robert Kennedy." My mother said I was, like, not making any sense, but she got the gist of what I said. So anyway, the next day, the LAPD came to my house and took me back to Rampart in Los Angeles, the Rampart station, and asked again about the polka-dot dress, and then had me go in another room where they had two dozen—or it seemed like two dozen, but maybe it was only a dozen—polka-dot dresses hanging all around the room.

HUNT

And what were they for?

SEWELL

I was supposed to identify which dress most resembled the dress that the woman I seen had on. And then they had a dime, a penny, and a quarter and said, "What was the size of the polka dots?" And I was like, "I mean, it was just a white dress with polka dots on it and had a collar on it, and the girl had a ski nose and short hair, and she was Caucasian. And the guy had a gold sweater on and the other guy just had, like, a white shirt." I didn't remember. And the two guys looked like Mexican Americans to me. At that time, my visual appraisals of people were very limited because I came from Ohio, and so I didn't come from seeing very many ethnics that were not European. I came from an area where I was seeing Eastern Europeans, you know, Polish and Czechoslovakians and Serbians, and I didn't see dark-skinned people, so anybody with dark hair and olive-color skin, to me, well, that must be Mexican. So I didn't know Middle Eastern from anything else.

HUNT

So when you were still at the hotel and you were being held, you mentioned with some other people, what were the other people's experiences that night and why were they being held?

SEWELL

Well, the one guy that I spoke to was a waiter, who was a waiter at the hotel, who also said he seen a woman with a polka-dot dress. And him and I talked to each other, and he said, "Why are you here?" And I told him. He said, "That's what I saw too." So our conversations were—I think everybody was too stunned and too, like, "What's going to happen?" You get a feeling that you're, like, in trouble or something, and I think that has to do with your age and what happened and your lack of experience. I know today, I know even twenty years ago, I would never allow myself to be treated the way I was treated.

HUNT

What things particularly do you think—

SEWELL

First of all, I was badgered, completely badgered, and I was lied to by the LAPD and I was told, like, "I'm good friends with Ethel Kennedy and I talked to her, and we know you're lying, so just admit that you're lying and we'll forget all this." Apparently, this interview, it was taped, and I heard the interview at the twentieth anniversary of his death. It was released by the California [State] Archives and somebody sent it to me. The L.A. Weekly ran a news article about it saying that it was a great example of beating up on a witness and of getting a witness to recant, because I say on there, "What do you want me to say? I'll say whatever you want me to say." But I'm also saying, like, two seconds before, "I saw what I saw. I'm not saying that they were part of this. I'm saying this was a weird encounter. You are the ones that are putting it together, not me."

HUNT

So when they talk about lying, you felt like they were suggesting that you were lying?

SEWELL

Yes, they were saying that I was lying. Yes, they were saying that I was lying. I remember getting hysterical, and they're saying, "Oh, well, now you have to take a polygraph test," and being so hysterical that they had to administer the test, like, four or five times. And then they finally said, "See, the polygraph test says you're lying." Knowing that my aunt and uncle were really religious people and knowing that if they knew what was happening they would get all upset, so I said, "Well, don't tell them what's happening because they'll just get so upset." It was just awful. And then the next day, that whole—well, they took me to the Ambassador that same day, said to me, "We're going to prove that you're lying. We're going to prove that you can't even identify where you were and that there is no fire escape there." And, "Okay, fine." So they took me to the Ambassador and took me to the lobby and said, "Now, retrace your steps." So I went to the ball room and I went to the door, then I went, and sure enough, there was a fire escape. They took a photograph of me on the fire escape. The whole thing was –it was a horrible experience. It was just a terrible, terrible experience. The newspapers at that time, the L.A. Times, was like quoting the chief of police—I can't even remember who it was—"This isn't going to be a Dallas. We're going to wrap this up." I was like, "What's all this?" And the FBI then coming to my aunt and uncle's house because now they wanted to know how come we lived two blocks away from Sirhan Sirhan. And we didn't even know. That's how we found out. We didn't even know he lived two blocks away.

HUNT

So how long did you feel like you were—

SEWELL

About a week. About a week I was harassed.

HUNT

So you were contacted by the LAPD.

SEWELL

Yes, every day, every day something, something, something. And then they came out with it was a figment of my imagination, and then the other guy, they said that he made his story to adjust to my story, and that we had spoken

ahead of time and compared notes and agreed that this is the story we were going to tell. I was like, you know, this is just too ridiculous.

HUNT

Did they have a reason about why you would choose to make up the story?

SEWELL

I have no idea. I have no idea. Then it was never recorded. If you look it up on the Internet, you can find all this stuff. There are other people who witnessed these people. A wig and a dress were found a few days later in a garbage can by the Ambassador Hotel, you know. So, I mean, I don't know. I don't know if somebody put it there to add to the mystery of it all. I have no idea if these other people were involved. I don't know. All I know is that was my experience that night and it was a terrible experience with the LAPD.

HUNT

So how were you doing through all that if there was a week where they were constantly [unclear]?

SEWELL

Well, I was in tears all the time. I was in tears and I was a nervous wreck. I was just like, "I can't believe this is happening." I couldn't understand why. And what was really strange is this one guy that kept harping at me. I guess what they decided to do was to assign a Mexican detective to me, Mexican American detective. His name was [Hank] Hernandez, and ten, fifteen years later when I was heavily involved—no, ten years later—starting to get heavily involved in Latino politics throughout the state, I'd be at these fundraising events and there'd be this guy there. He would be at these events, too, and he would be, like, always staring at me, and I'd be, "Who the fuck is that?" He made me feel very uncomfortable. It wasn't until about ten years ago that my very good friend, former Councilman Richard Alatorre, and I were talking, and he said, "Hey, man, I didn't know that you were part of that whole Kennedy thing." And I said, "Yeah, it's a time I'd rather forget." And he said, "Like, what happened?" So I was telling him, and he said, "Wow." He said, "You were at that thing at Belvedere Junior High

School, that Viva Kennedy, where they were teaching us about the voting machines and that?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "That was my first year—no, I was working for [Walter] Wally Karabian as an aide." That was the guy who was assemblyperson and who Richard later became the representative for that same assembly district. And he said, "Man, we go way back." I said, "Yeah." And so I said, "You know, there's this guy that maybe you know who he is." And he said, "The next event, point him out to me." So there was some political event and—oh, it was a fundraiser for Art Torres, who was running for supervisor for L.A. County against Gloria Molina—and I said, "That's him, Richard. That's him." And Richard said, "Oh, that's Hank Hernandez." And I said, "Who the hell is he?" He said, "Oh, well, he used to work for LAPD, but everyone now says he works for the C.I.A. He has his own security firm and he has some Washington clients and some corporate clients. He's pretty big-time, but people say he really is a C.I.A. [Central Intelligence Agency] operative." I said, "Really?" I said, "Well, that's the guy that's always staring me down." And Richard said, "Yeah?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "I'm going to go say something to him." You know, Richard is a very popular man. He was a city councilperson. He was an assemblyperson. He still is. He's been out of office for fifteen years, and "The Forty Most Powerful People in Los Angeles" list just came out and he was on that list still. So he went up to Hank Hernandez and said, "How come you're always on her case?" Hank Hernandez denied that he was on my case, and he said, "Well, she tells me that you were the cop that interviewed her." And Hank Hernandez says, "Yeah, yeah, I was." And he says, "Well, is she still on your radar or what?" And he says, "No, I'm just surprised that she became so involved politically and shot up there pretty quickly and is at all the same events that I'm at." So Richard said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." Well, three years ago, I was at my house in La Quinta [California], and an artist from Pasadena was at my house. She came with this guy who's part of what's called the Rodriquez family in Los Angeles, and they're an old lefty family who own a restaurant in East L.A., and all the

brothers have been very politically active. One of the brothers raised money and bought weapons for Marcos in Mexico, the guerrilla guy. They're real well known for being underground lefties. I had just received the video from the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation], and so Mario said to Jorge Rodriguez, "Oh, do you want to see this video?" And he said, "Yeah." He said, "Ah, shit. That was Hank Hernandez?" Because by then I knew it was Hank Hernandez, okay? He said, "Man, he's a C.I.A. person. He's been investigating our family forever." And I'm like, "Really?" So that was my experience with that. It was very strange, very, very, very strange.

HUNT

What's your feeling about Hernandez's interests in—

SEWELL

Well, he's dead now. He died a couple years ago. You know, I mean, it's like, okay, if he was a C.I.A. operative—I don't know. If he was interested in me or not interested in me or what, who knows? I really don't have any—I wasn't trying to hide anything. I thought he was creepy. I thought he was a creepy person, and just seeing him at these events, and he gave me a creepy—you know when you have a feeling that you're someplace and somebody's staring at you? I would get that feeling. I would know immediately if he was there because I would get this feeling that somebody was staring at me. And sure enough, I'd look around and there he'd be. So who knows? But by that time, when I started to really notice it, I was very, very, very politically involved, very active. I had already run the Gloria Molina campaign for Assembly and had been active in the Comisión Femenil [Mexicana Nacional] and women's events. So there were not that many Latinas that were as high profile as I was. I served on the Finance Committee of a number of the male electives, and at that time there was not that many male electives. There were two women that served on the Finance Committees, because those were like boys' clubs. They didn't allow women to serve on them.

HUNT

Going back to just one thing, if it's okay, you mentioned the specific scenario of investigators coming to your aunt and uncle's home in Altadena and introducing the fact that Sirhan Sirhan was your neighbor. Can you talk a little bit more about that and what you learned?

SEWELL

We really didn't learn too much, just that he was a neighbor and that—by that time, you were seeing everything in the newspaper, so really there was nothing—we didn't know him from Adam, so—

HUNT

How did you feel about the media coverage at that time? Were you paying attention to it, and did you feel like it was accurate or they were trying to play things a certain way?

SEWELL

I thought the media coverage was pretty fair, and realizing now how it works, at that time I didn't realize how it worked, but it turned on a dime. Then came a point when I felt like they were not believing me. They were believing the LAPD, but, of course, that's LAPD and LAPD is feeding them whatever they want to feed them.

HUNT

Did anyone from the media come to talk to you personally or just through the—

SEWELL

I remember that somebody from the Star News and from the L.A. Times called me, and I spoke to them briefly, but—

HUNT

And that whole situation came pretty quickly on the heels of the assassination of Martin Luther King [Jr.].

SEWELL

Martin Luther King, yes, so it was pretty—when King was assassinated, I got really very, very upset by it. It's strange when—at that time, even, I felt that these were such horrible acts of violence. It was unimaginable to me. I had been a freshman in high school when JFK [John F. Kennedy] was assassinated, so these assassinations came at very crucial periods of my life and development and my process of thinking. So what they did, both instances, Martin Luther

King, Jr.'s and RFK's [Robert F. Kennedy], was even seal in my mind even more the thought that the only way people will not be oppressed and people will be victorious for any cause will be if they stick together and if they don't waiver from their beliefs. That was just a further magnification for me of what I believed anyway through my experiences with my parents through the unions. It just sealed it more. It just sealed it more that you don't what's called drop a dime on people. That means talk out of frustration and talk to the authorities about people's involvement. If they want to know about people's involvement, go ask them. It made me further believe in what this country was supposed to be about, and the whole issue of freedom and the whole issue of assembly and the whole issue of speech and the whole issue of rights, that these are things that will always be worth fighting for, will always be worth standing up for, and always be worth believing in. And when we stop believing in these things, that'll be the end of this country. I really, really strongly believe that.

HUNT

It sounds like this was just a really difficult period for you.

SEWELL

It was. It was real, real difficult, and, again, I think that certain things happen to you because they're meant to happen to you. So I learned a lot from it. I learned about how systems work without having to further my formal education. I felt like I really gained much more than somebody studying at Harvard [University] from these experiences. And what was really funny was years, years later, there's an organization—I don't know if you know of it—called Coro.

HUNT

Yes.

SEWELL

Okay. There was a period that they were looking for Latinas to become part of the Coro experience, and so I urged many of my friends, women friends through Comisión, to go out and try for it. And then finally the Coro people said, "Well, you should try out." I said, "I can't. I'm not a college

graduate," because you have to be a college graduate. So they said, "Well, there's this other thing called Citizens' Liaison [phonetic] and it was founded by the same person who put together the whole Coro experience." I think his name was Fleming [phonetic]. "Go do that. That'll be great training for you." So I gave this guy a call and I interviewed with him for about an hour, and he said, "You don't need the program. You don't need the Coro experience either, because what you've learned already is what we're teaching in these situations that we put the students through, you know, how to work in labor unions, how to figure out who are the power players, how to connect with power players, how to stick to your beliefs, how to adjust your beliefs." He said, "You already know that. Your experiences have taught you that." And I was like, "Oh, okay, that's cool." So— [laughs]

HUNT

Well, it sounds like you were really resilient following all of this. I think last time you mentioned your now-husband, then-boyfriend also played a role in helping you to navigate through the situation and then move on to the next [unclear].

SEWELL

Yes, and I think part of it was that he's ten years older than I am and he's highly formally educated, and when I would have doubts about myself or feel bad about myself, he was always there to say, "You're going to do okay no matter what you do. You just are one of those lucky people in life." I was like, "Well, if I'm so lucky, how come I'm working at this damn insurance agency and barely making minimum wage?" He was just a real good supporter and somebody to lean on, and he still, to this day, has played that role in our relationship.

HUNT

So it was the year after Martin Luther King, Jr., and Kennedy that you were married and expecting your first child, right?

SEWELL

Right.

HUNT

So did things change right away after you were married, expecting a baby?

SEWELL

First of all, as I said, my husband was highly educated, but he was driving a taxicab because he quite couldn't decide what he wanted to do with his life. And I'm like, "Wait a minute. I'm twenty years old. You're thirty years old and you can't figure out what to do with your life, and you've got a master's degree from Stanford [University], an undergraduate degree from University of Chicago, a graduate degree from USC [University of Southern California]? What do you mean you don't know what you want to do with your life?" [laughs] I remember getting so upset one day that I got all his degrees and hung them up in the bathroom, and he got really pissed at me and he went off to some—I forget what the name of that religion is. He was part of some alternative religion, and he had his little beads that he prayed with and his little box. I would make fun of it and say, "You don't even know who you're praying to. Who are you praying to? What are you doing? Go out and find a job. I'll give you a secret word: job, job, job." [laughs] So he was one of these people that if he could be a perpetual student, he would be a perpetual student his whole life. So he came home one day and said, "I applied for this [W.K.] Kellogg Foundation scholarship." And I said, "What?" He said, "Yes. I'm pretty sure I'm going to get it. I meet all the qualifications and everything." And I'm like, "Oh, my god, I can't believe this." I said, "I'm pregnant. I haven't had any prenatal care," because we didn't have any money for insurance or anything. "What do you mean?" And he said, "No, no, no. We'll get, like, $300 a month from the scholarship and then I'll get $175 a month from G.I., and so our rent is 150." I mean, he had it all figured out. "And you're still working." "But I'm not going to be working much longer." So he ended up getting the scholarship and ended up getting a master's degree in public health from UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. So as soon as he finished with that, he ended up being hired by the county in the Department of Health Services, where he then stayed till

he retired, many times wanting to quit, but being reminded that he had a family, a wife and two children, to take care of. I'd say by the time I was pregnant with my daughter, which would have been almost four years since we got married, I was pretty frustrated by then because I had dropped out of being politically involved and I was really, really going quite bonkers. No, that was—I think I was pregnant with her, because that was about 1972, so I must have been pregnant with her, because she was born in '73. I mean, I was home. I belonged to a Mothers Club with my son, which was you went and took your child and you observed them playing with other children and interacting with them. It was Adult Extension from Pasadena City College. And, you know, I was involved in mommy things. I even joined a Bible study group. What moved me to join a Bible study, I'll never know, but I joined the Bible study and studied the Bible from the edition called Good News for Modern Man, and remember arguing with the other women, who were all fundamentalist, these points in the Bible, and them all thinking that I was very weird but that I had a chance to be saved. [laughs] So it was a pretty weird experience. So during that time I had the baby, I had Nicole [Sewell], and then I seen in the local paper that there was going to be a NOW [National Organization for Women] meeting, and I said, "Oh, wow, this sounds like something really good." So I remember getting dressed up, doing my hair, putting on makeup, just getting all dressed up to go to this meeting. And I walk into this meeting and there's all these Anglo women in jeans, no bras, and sweatshirts, and all looking pretty skuzzy, and sitting at the meeting and introducing myself. Then I became the focal point of the meeting because of the way I was dressed, and being attacked for being dressed up because I was trying to prove something, and that I was trying to prove that I could be attractive to men, and I was trying to prove that I was—they came pretty short of calling me a Jezebel, quite frankly. I was shocked and I was like, "What the—?"

HUNT

Did you react?

SEWELL

"I'm from the Midwest." Yes, I did. I said, "I'm from the Midwest. We get dressed up when we go out. We don't dress like that. We dress like that at home when we're cleaning house." I was just shocked, absolutely shocked. I remember going home and crying, and telling my husband these women were so mean and they were so mean-spirited, and they hated men and they talked bad about men, and they talked bad about women who didn't realize that they were in chains. I was like, "I'm not in any chains." I didn't feel ashamed that I was a homemaker and I didn't feel ashamed that I had two children and I didn't feel ashamed that I didn't finish my formal education. Everything that I was at that time that they were placing value on, I had no value to them.

HUNT

So was that your first—

SEWELL

That was my first NOW meeting.

HUNT

First meeting of a women's organization.

SEWELL

Yes, and I was just, "Oh, my—." I thought it was the most horrible thing on Earth. I thought, "This is awful."

HUNT

Did you go back?

SEWELL

"This is awful." No, I didn't go back. I mean, I didn't go back. I remember hearing about Gloria Steinem and reading about her, and saying, "How does she know that these things are happening?" And writing her a letter and saying, "This was my experience, and how many women are you turning off?" Just horrified, horrified at the whole thing. So a couple months later—let's see. My daughter was born in January. This must have been in March. So in May, my husband read a small article in the L.A. Times that there was going to be a formal organizing meeting and conference for an organization called Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, and it was going to be in Santa Barbara on the campus. Registration was, like, $20. We were living on a real tight

budget. He showed it to me and said, "Maybe you should go to this. This sounds like they're all Mexican American women." And I said, "No, I'm not going to go to another women's thing. Are you out of your mind?" He said, "No, I think you should go. I think you should go." I said, "Well, we don't have the money anyway. Registration is $20." I paid for lunch for two days and then—oh, then if you were going to stay there, you had to pay an extra $15, so it was going to be, like, $35. So he went and sold his blood, and that's how I got the money for the registration and went, and went to this thing and just was totally blown away and was totally excited.

HUNT

So what did you see there? What did you hear there?

SEWELL

First of all, they were all Mexican American women, and there were a few what would be now Latinas. People then were—you were Chicana. That's what you were, and understanding what the term "Chicana" meant, it meant that you were of Mexican American descent and that you were politically aware. So, I mean, there were varied age groups. There were farm worker women there. There were educated women there, formally educated women. I mean, it was just such a wonderful group of women that it was so exciting, and I thought, "Oh, my god, this is, like, the best thing on Earth." So I immediately figured out who was the leader of this, and it was this woman called Francisca Flores and another woman called Gracia Molina de Pick, and moved my way to their table, and introduced myself and told them where I was from and what my experience with NOW had been. Gracia Molina Pick was personal friends with Gloria Steinem and said, "I'm going to call her." And I said, "Well, I wrote her a letter and I sent it to that magazine that she has." She said, "Oh, I'm going to call her and tell her." And I said, "Oh, okay." Well, they ended up becoming my mentors, Francisca Flores and her. At that time, they were in their forties and they had already had a long history of being involved in Latino politics and Chicano politics. Gracia started the Chicano Studies Department at San Diego, University of

San Diego, and Francisca Flores was the editor of a Mexican American quarterly literary magazine that came out, called Regeneración. They both had long histories of being politically involved, so I could've not picked two better mentors than them, and I owe so much of my maturity and progress to their good mentorship. Gracia's still alive. Francisca died. But they never made you feel—they would tell you all the time how important we were to our families and to the future development of California, and it was just wonderful. And wonderful artists came out of there that ended up making the logos for Comisión, ended up doing murals with young people. [Judith F.] Judy Baca was one of them, she's a well-known Chicana artist. I mean, it was just great. It was wonderful. I ended up being national president of the organization.

HUNT

How did you get to that level? It looks like it didn't take you long.

SEWELL

Well, I would say it took about four years, took about four years. I just learned a lot about strategic thinking, how to do things. It was funny because what had happened is that the L.A. chapter of Comisión's leadership were formally educated women and in many ways they were very similar to their sisters, their Caucasian sisters, where they felt that their formal education elevated them in life, and it does, but the problem with thinking of oneself as being elevated, it begins to seep into your other thoughts of how you conduct yourself and how you look at people as a whole, so you have to be real careful not to fall into that trap of thinking that you're better, you know. Most certainly formal education does give you the ability to use so many more tools, but it doesn't make one better than anyone else. They were starting to fall into the trap and they were starting to treat the women that were homemakers not very well, so there was like a little schism within the organization in the L.A. chapter. So I started the Pasadena chapter and then we started a Rio Hondo chapter, and within a year's time we started something like eight more chapters that were mostly made

up of women that were in similar circumstances like my own. So by the time elections were going to come around and I wanted to run for the presidency, I was told by the leadership in the L.A. chapter that I couldn't run because it would just be better for—because they were already interfacing with NOW in the—that had the other group, National Women's Political Caucus, and so they wanted to get across to those women that we have women that were formally educated. So they felt that our leadership should reflect that, and so I said, "Okay, fine." Francisca and Gracia said, "Read the bylaws. Read the bylaws and read them well and you'll figure out how to win the election." So one of the things that the bylaws failed to do was put a time limit on how long you had to be a member in order to vote at the annual business meeting. [laughs] So I figured it out, and so the Pasadena chapter and the Rio Hondo chapter put its treasury together and had cookie sales to raise money to run buses, to bus in the women from Fresno, to bus in the women from outer San Francisco to come down for the annual business meeting to vote for me. So that day, the woman I was running against, who was best friends at that time with Gloria Molina, and Gloria Molina was the president, the national president, and she had endorsed her best friend, that woman was dating this guy who was active in Jaycees [United States Junior Chamber], who was their parliamentarian. So they made a strategic error of making him parliamentarian for our annual business meeting. When I went in, it didn't click with me that what's this guy? He's going to be the parliamentarian telling us when we can speak and when we can't speak? Gracia and Francisca were sitting there and they were like—people didn't bother them. You only went to ask them something if it was really super important. Well, they're left like the Untouchables. They called me over and they said, "He shouldn't be parliamentarian. Raise the question of him being parliamentarian." And I said, "Why?" And they said, "Think about it." So I'm, like, going back to my seat saying, "Oh, okay." So I raised my hand and I said, "I object. I object to him being parliamentarian." He got up and he said, "You're

out of order." I got up. "I make a motion to remove him as parliamentarian." And then somebody from our group seconded the motion. Of course, we had the votes because we had bused in all these people. So then the other side wanted to speak to the reasons why and gave all the reasons why he should remain as parliamentarian, and I spoke all the reasons that he shouldn't. I said, "There's really one reason, and that reason is that he's a man and he shouldn't be given the power to tell us at our own meeting when we're in order and when we're out of order. Granted, he has his—." I guess you get some kind of certificate to be a parliamentarian. "And who better knows the organization? Who better knows the Robert's Rules of Order and all this than our founder, who's right here, Francisca Flores? So after this vote I'm going to nominate her to become the parliamentarian." Nobody would dare not go for that, right? So he got booted out, so that's how I became president. [laughs]

HUNT

What were the reactions to you becoming president of the national organization?

SEWELL

Well, I had my supporters, so I didn't care about the handful of fifteen women in the L.A. chapter who were royally pissed about it, you know. I mean, I just didn't care. I just didn't care.

HUNT

And what were your goals as president? What did you want to do?

SEWELL

One, I wanted to raise the profile of the homemaker, and, two, I wanted us to take a stand on choice, on sexual preference and choice. That was an issue that we had been avoiding as an organization because most of the women were Catholic. [recorder turned off]

HUNT

Okay. So you mentioned that these were the priorities for your organization. How do you think the priorities that you were thinking of fit into —

SEWELL

Those were my priorities. The organizational priorities, they were really not defined. There was every year a national issues conference called the Mexican American National Issues Conference that was made up of various Mexican American organizations like [American] G.I. Forum, MAPA [Mexican American Political Association], and that were men-dominated, and they would come up with issues that they would want all the organizations to work on. So it could be like the [Regents of the University of California v.] Bakke case. Was that the name of it, Bakke? What was the name of our—it had to do with enrollment. I forgot the name of it. So I just felt that we needed to have our own agenda, that we could work on the National Issues Conference issues, but we needed to have our own issues. So my personal issues were choice. People expressed themselves at the meeting. The Fresno chapter voted for me, but they got up in disagreement about dealing with choice and sexual preference. That's a farm-working community and very Catholic, and those are just two issues that they just were not going to deal with, not even going to talk about them. I just felt it was really super important. So the L.A. chapter saw that even in the group that supported me, that there was a schism. So the leadership of the L.A. chapter at that time, who was Gloria Molina, Yolanda Nava, they were against us taking it up. They spoke against it, and in the beginning they worked against it, that the organization did not have to address it. There was no reason for it. It's really funny how people revise history in their later life. [laughs]

HUNT

Are you thinking of any particular examples?

SEWELL

Names will go unsaid, but it's really amazing to me how people do that. Anyway, one of the first things I did was plan for a conference that was held at Caltech [California Institute of Technology] and it was to address those two issues. Those two issues would be voted on, and that was a whole year later that that conference happened. So we had all the pro-lifers come out for it with their ugly little signs and everything. It was very interesting that saying that we were

going to take a stand on that changed our image with the white women's groups.

HUNT

Can you talk a little bit more about that?

SEWELL

They became much more interested in us. They were interested in us before, but more or less as an ornament, you know, not as part of decision making. There would be these, like I said, intergroup meetings, and they would be the representatives of various women's organizations—what do you call them—universities of some women. What are they called?

HUNT

Maybe American Association of University Women.

SEWELL

Yes, yes, yes. And then NOW and NWPC, National Women's Political Caucus, yes, and Comisión, but I don't really think they took us too seriously. But when that happened, it was like, "You're going to address it?" And their women showed up at our conference because they were very interested to see how we were going to deal with it. They had all dealt with it already, but they knew that this was going to be a biggie, a big, big, big deal. At that time, there was another national women's organization called MANA [originally Mexican American National Association; today A National Latina Organization], and that was based out of Washington, D.C., and they were, like, shocked that we were going to take it up, so they sent people out to the conference, and the National Association of Puerto Rican Women sent a representative, and the National Association of Cuban American Women sent out—so we had people coming from back East because, "Oh, my god, those radical women in Comisión Femenil are going to take a stand on this issue." So at the conference, the whole Fresno chapter membership, which was about eighty women, got up and left.

HUNT

And how did that impact the meeting?

SEWELL

People were like, "Oh, no." [laughs] I remember being at the podium, and when I went up there to speak and started and said, "We're going to address these issues and we're going to vote on them, and so there's workshops available for you," and the president of the Fresno chapter got up and said, "With all due respect, we will not be part of this. We are no longer an affiliate of Comisión Femenil. We will just be, from here on, known as League of Mexican American Women." And to this date, that's what they're known as, the League of Mexican American Women. They said something like, "We like you, Sandy, but we're not with you on this," and I remember standing there and saying I respected them and respected their feelings and I believed that they should do everything to stand by their beliefs. So they left. It was interesting. The Right-to-Lifers were there, too. You couldn't deny anybody from coming if they paid their conference fees. By then the bylaws had changed, though. You could not become a member. People were trying to become members. That's one of the first things I did is you had to be a member for so long before you could vote. So they did not team up with them, like, take up their signs and all that kind of stuff now. They just left the conference. So at the end of the conference, we voted and we voted to be pro-choice and pro-sexual preference. That was a big deal. I'm very proud of that.

HUNT

And by putting forward those as your priorities, how do you think that impacted the overall trajectory of what the organization accomplished and has done since then?

SEWELL

Well, just prior to that, and which really helped my belief, was that Comisión had been involved with a lawsuit against County USC Medical Center called Madrigal v. Quilligan.

HUNT

Tell me about that.

SEWELL

That was to prevent the forced sterilization of women, and that there had to be a waiting period before a woman could be sterilized, and she had to have her forms in Spanish and

she had to have somebody explain it to her in Spanish, if that was her prominent language, exactly what was going to take place. So we ended up winning. It was a class action and we ended up winning that case, so I used that as part of my platform. "That was a choice issue. I'm not saying how you have to choose. I'm saying we need to support and we already have supported women having the right to choose by our involvement in this suit."

HUNT

So did you feel like that specific example gave people a better understanding?

SEWELL

Yes. Yes, and, I mean, people really were able to say, "Yeah, that's really true. We're not saying you have to go have an abortion. We're not saying that. We're saying you have the right to choose whether you want to have children, and that you should be able to have those children and if you don't want to have children. And so if you have those rights to choose those things, you have a right to choose who you want as a partner in life." I mean, people were able to draw together. How it impacted the organization was it elevated the organization, number one, okay, in the eyes of the women's community, and it also separated Comisión from other women's organizations that were Latina organization. We were the premier political women's organization for Latinas to belong to. If you wanted to go join the Hispanic Women's Council, go ahead and join it, and go ahead and have your fashion shows and your tea parties, because that's what they did, but if you wanted to do something and create change and be part of a way of thinking for the future, you had to belong to Comisión. In fact, we were known as the "Comisión commies." [laughter]

HUNT

So I read also that in '77 there was a National Women's Conference in Houston [Texas].

SEWELL

Yes, in Houston.

HUNT

And Comisión won a really big award there. They were named leading U.S. Latina foundation. Do you remember anything about that?

SEWELL

Well, what happened, it's another funny story. I was president at that time, and Maxine Waters was in the Assembly, and Grace Davis, Grace Montañez Davis was deputy mayor under [Tom] Bradley. So the California delegation that was going to go to that conference—and let's see. On the national commission for that conference, it was put together by the [James R. "Jimmy"] Carter administration. Gloria Steinem was on it, and Carmen Votaw from the National Association of Puerto Rican Women, and a few other Latinas, and they were great women, Latina women, but they weren't Comisión women. Comisión, by then, had firmly established itself as the organization willing to take risk, and, quite frankly, I think that had more to do with whoever was at the leadership, what they were willing to push, and how much of a risk taker that person was. There's no doubt about I'm a huge risk taker. So there was a fight going on between the African American women and the Latina women of who was going to head up the delegation from California. Was it going to be Maxine [Waters] or was it going to be Grace [Davis]? There were these pre-meetings at USC, and oh, my god, they got pretty ugly because the black women were already starting to feel that they were losing ground already in '77. The women that were astute, Marguerite Archie, Maxine [Waters], a lot of the women, they knew what was the writing on the wall, that their days were numbered, quote, quote, as a huge force body, and that who was coming around the corner were the Latinas. So they really felt that Maxine needed to be chair of the group. I liked Maxine. I thought Maxine was an absolutely brilliant, wonderful woman. I thought she was just fabulous. And I liked Grace. Now, Grace had a different kind of leadership. Grace was part of the old guard, like Francisca and that. They were women that—Grace had been formally educated. Women that got where they were by the steady step, all right? So Grace was not a dynamic person. Grace was not a

woman that would get up and have great oratory skills and would move you, all right? But Latina women felt she was deputy mayor of Los Angeles, she was the highest-ranking Latina in the state, and she should be the chair of the delegation. So I had a meeting with—as being the national president of Comisión, and Marguerite Archie was the national president of the prominent black woman's group at that time, and so the four of us met because the infighting was pretty bad, and I said, "You know, we can't have this. We can't go to this conference and be divided. We're going to go to this conference. There's going to be women from every state there. This conference is going to be in Texas. Our fear has to be the delegations that are the conservative delegations from Utah, from—." Because each area got to vote for their representatives, their voting representatives. "We have to worry about whether the E.R.A. [Equal Rights Amendment] thing will pass. We can't have this, so my proposal is you both be co-chairs. I mean, it's clean, it's simple. You both are on equal footing." And everyone said, "That's great. Let's do it." So they were co-chairs. So it was like, oh, my god, Comisión solved this whole problem. I mean, it was just really simple, right? Don't take a rocket scientist to figure that one out. When we got there, again we go back to some time how the dominant group thinks that they know what's best for everyone, and the dominant group, of course, was Bella [Abzug], Gloria Steinem, [Mildred McWilliams] Millie Jeffrey, all these Caucasian women, and they wrote our platform, the whole platform. There was, like, twenty-three or twenty-four platform items.

HUNT

That's for the entire conference?

SEWELL

Yes, for the entire conference, and then we were to vote on each one of them, the entire conference. Ours was one paragraph for Hispanic women. For black women, it was two paragraphs. Didn't even think about Native American women or Asian women. And I took one look at that and had a f'ing fit. I'm like, "What the hell is this?" Well, by this time, I know Gloria Steinem already. I mean, I'm on a first-name basis

with her. There's a photograph of the two of us that's been reprinted a number of times. It's in the Santa Barbara Archives, of me shaking my finger at Gloria Steinem. [laughter]

HUNT

Do you remember the moment? Do you remember what you were talking about?

SEWELL

Yes, I was really pissed. I'm like, "Who the hell you think you are? You can't be doing this. You keep making the same mistakes over and over and over again. We will write our own platform and the black women will write their own platform. And what about the Asian women? What about the Native American women? Come on. I mean, we get one paragraph? This is ridiculous." They said, "Well, originally it was one paragraph for minority women." I'm like, "Oh, my god." [laughs] So they thought they had moved from that. So I went to all the groups, Maxine, let Maxine know what was happening. Maxine hit the ceiling because they hadn't—one of the bad things about how minority women's experiences and their lack of training is we don't look over things very carefully. We accept what you tell us. By that time, I developed reading everything. I've gone through too much already. I went through the whole Kennedy crap. I went through Comisión's inside politics. In fact, I ended up getting my certificate for parliamentarian. I mean, I just would make sure that I knew everything. I became an expert on writing bylaws. I just would see each thing as a challenge, so I mean it was like—and I was having fits. So we had our own caucuses. So as a result of that, that's why we got voted that as an organization, because we really pulled together all the minority women and we ended up reading the plank, each one of our groups. It was funny, because Carmela [G.] Lacayo was one of the Latina representatives on the overall committee, the commission, so it was expected that she was going to read it to all of those assembled there, and the various Latina women organizations that were there said, "No, Comisión leadership has to. They're the ones that put all this together. They're the ones that have to do it." So I

ended up reading for Mexican American women. Maxine read for African American women. Billie Masters read for Native American women. I forget the name of the women who read for the Asian women. So got up there and read. I have a wonderful photograph of Coretta Scott King and myself, because she got up. She was, like, the first person to get up because she was on the National Commission, and start clapping, and the whole Assembly—there were thousands of women there—got up, the official delegates and the Assembly, and it was the only plank that was passed with 100 percent vote.

HUNT

Wow.

SEWELL

And it was, like, amazing, and the floor demonstration was fifteen minutes because people realized that it was a breakthrough, and it was pretty cool.

HUNT

Do you remember what specific issues you talked about or what changes were made?

SEWELL

Well, we talked about educational access, the rights of immigrant women and their children. Those were the pretty main issues.

HUNT

And do you remember feeling like what you had to say contrasted a lot from what—

SEWELL

Oh, yes.

HUNT

—other people said?

SEWELL

The other thing was, like, general, we all should be treated equal, one of those kinds of fancy things. So this was much more specific. It was a good thing.

HUNT

The next thing that I remember reading about was the Equal Rights march, which came in the next year?

SEWELL

Came the next year. [laughs] That was fun. So we had a member of the organization who I was still friendly with her, but she still had memories of me under-dogging her friend. Gloria Molina was working in the White House at that time under [President James Earl] Carter [Jr.], and Gracia Molina de Pick came and said, "We have to go to Washington. We have to be part of this national E.R.A. march." And I was like, "Okay." So we got all the information on it and everything else, and we organized the women, and thirty-two of us went from California as part of the organization. We decided that we would all wear white and we'd all wear colorful hats. Some of us brought our children with us. I brought my two children and my husband. Other women brought their children with them. We had our banner made and the whole thing. I said, "Well, since we're going to be there, then we need to have the experience of lobbying." And everybody was like, "Well, what does that mean?" So I put together two workshops on what does lobbying mean and what were we going to speak to and who was going to speak. This was now we're getting in a more formal situation, so we have to conduct ourselves a little bit more formally than we normally do. So we made meetings with [Alan] Cranston and various other elected officials. The women were really excited. Years, years later, when the Hispanic Women's Council became a little bit politically involved because they seen that that was the way to go, they planned a trip to Washington, D.C., and said it was the first time that Latinas would ever go and lobby, I called them on it. I said, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no. This has been done. I'm glad you're doing it again, but it's not the first."

HUNT

What kind of skills do you remember teaching people in those sessions?

SEWELL

Reading, knowing the issue. The big issue then was funding for the B-1 bomber and whether or not—was it the B-1, B-2? One of those Bs. And speaking against continued funding for it. One of the women was an employee of Rockwell [International] and she was like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no,

I can't do this. I can't do this. No, this is my job. I can't do this." We said, "It's fine. You don't have to go and be part of it." And she says, "No, I want to be part of it." And I said, "Okay, then we'll give you ten minutes to speak to the issue." So she was a happy camper. So she went with Senator Cranston. He was a liberal. He was not interested really in funding that. So she spoke on behalf of Rockwell International and their employees, so she was a happy camper. We were all happy. We learned about how that whole process works and the value of it, and what we realized then when we came back was that I had to put together a mini-conference on how to get elected. So that's the next thing I did.

HUNT

So, thinking about the march, it was organized by the National Organization for Women, as I read it. How were you feeling about NOW at that time? Did it feel like they were the other group, or just a bigger group?

SEWELL

I didn't have a problem with them. The Pasadena chapter was a very active chapter. Later from my first time with them and in between then, I interfaced with them, told them why I never came back, cleared the air with them, told them the mistakes I thought they were making. But by that time, they realized that they were making big errors because other women were complaining about how their positions as homemakers were being lessened by their organization. So they tried various things to clean up their act, and I think that they did. So, no, I felt that they were okay. It just wasn't my organization. I belonged to the National Women's Political Caucus, I belonged to them, but I never became a dues-paying member of NOW.

HUNT

Did events like that march give you the feeling that women were united as a group and had in common certain goals, that if everyone came together, things would change, or did it still feel pretty fragmented?

SEWELL

No, by then I already had the feeling that if women stick together—because women were sticking together, a lot was getting accomplished, okay, so it just reinforced my feeling. And, I mean, the sisterhood and all that does happen when you're in a big group like that and you're all marching for the same thing, and you get caught up with the emotion and everything, but the reality, looking after it, looking back on it, I think they were very positive experiences not only for me, for the women that I was close to, for my children, my husband, but for the country. And I really feel that it really helped cement the better things about the Women's Movement for all of America. [End of April 22, 2011 interview]

1.3. Session Three
May 23, 2011

HUNT

Today is Monday, May 23, 2011. This is Jackie Hunt with Sandra Serrano Sewell in Pasadena, California, and we're working on interview number three of our oral history series. So last time we talked a lot about activism and the kinds of things you were doing with different organizations, really on a nationwide scale. Can you talk generally—I mean, you were balancing a lot of things in your life during that same period, and one of the things, I'm thinking, is you were a married woman with children. Was that common for the women who were involved in the work that you were doing?

SEWELL

No, it really wasn't. A lot of the women were single. There were a few women who were married, but the children aspect was a whole other can of worms, so to speak. [laughs] But I had a very supportive husband and I took my children to as many of the things that I was involved in, whether it was an event or whether it was meetings. I remember one of my earliest memories of my daughter is when she was about four years old, and she got all her stuffed toys and her dolls and she lined them all up. Then she went to find a magazine and she was standing in front of

them. And I said, "What are you doing?" She said, "I'm having a meeting." [laughter] So there you go.

HUNT

So children came to the meetings and—

SEWELL

Well, my children came. A couple of times I got scolded for it, but just more or less told people to screw off, you know. I think it was very good for my children. Both of them are very well-spoken and both of them are active in their respective communities, and they didn't have negative memories about that. They had positive memories. They had more negative memories about falling to sleep on election night in the election headquarters, complained that the floor was cold. [laughs]

HUNT

So that's one of the things that I had read about in my research, that particularly in the Chicano Movement, women kind of felt it more of a right to have children and then involve their children in work, or at least not have to divide things 100 percent "This is my activist life. This is my personal life."

SEWELL

I never saw it as dividing it between my activist life and my personal life. It was my life and sharing my life with my family and my children, so I was never conflicted by it. I never felt guilty about it, just never conflicted. It was all very natural to me. It was very natural that I took them on boycotts. I took them everywhere with me, and, like I said, it only benefited them and it was certainly, a lot of times, a lot of fun with them. I think it was very good for all of us.

HUNT

So, maybe switching gears a little bit, one of the things that I also read about you doing was that you were a commissioner on the [Pasadena] Commission for the Status of Women.

SEWELL

Yes, in the city of Pasadena. It was the first year that the commission was put together. It's still in existence now. That's, what, twenty years, I guess, almost. And that was

interesting because the commission was definitely set up along ethnic lines. It was, like, so many whites, one Latina, two blacks. The only one that wasn't represented was Native Americans and Asians. But immediately people expected that you were going to advocate for whatever ethnic grouping or race you represented, and I always found that sort of odd.

HUNT

That division and that maybe numerical representation, is that how the commission was formed? That was the rule of the commission?

SEWELL

No, that wasn't the rule. That was people's vision of how the commission should be to be truly representative. I really always felt that to be truly representative, if it was a Commission of the Status of Women, it should have divergent views on how women in our society felt. So the commission, more or less, had the same views and we didn't have anybody there that was against the Equal Rights Amendment, nobody that was against abortion. I mean, it seemed to me that it was skewed, and I really didn't like that.

HUNT

What politics might the women on the commission have had in common that they all favored the Equal Rights Amendment or that they all were pro-choice?

SEWELL

Well, I would say that all of them were liberals. There were really not any conservatives on it. But this is the city of Pasadena, so people pretended like they were more conservative than they were.

HUNT

Interesting. Why do you think that is?

SEWELL

Because this is the city of Pasadena, and there's a certain way that you must behave, even during the protocol, during the meetings, and I found that all really fascinating. You really had to observe protocol.

HUNT

Are there any examples that come to mind about that?

SEWELL

You couldn't spontaneously just say what you wanted to say. You had to ask for permission to address the subject and you just had to be careful about what you said. You could get your point across, but the spontaneity of things I always had a real hard time with because I'm a very spontaneous person. I mean, I'm used to saying, "Well, that's crazy. I mean, why the hell you're going to do that?" And you had to watch that if you were going to be taken seriously. And of course, being the only Latina, I wanted to be taken seriously, so I had to watch my p's and q's. But I found later that that's pretty much how commissions operate, because I later served on the Commission for L.A. County for Children and Family Services [L.A. County Commission for Children and Families]. Then I also served on the Resources and Allocation Commission for the city of Pasadena, and then I also served on—that was an advisory council. But most of those formality kind of groups, there's protocol that you must observe if you're going to be taken seriously. My feeling is that people are too concerned with protocol, especially when something important needs to be said. Especially when I was on the Children's Services Commission, the Department of Mental Health budgeted money for children's services out of the budget. The department heads did this, see. They took it out of Children's Services' budget and put it into Mental Health, but not for children; just general. It went into the general fund. We got the report, and I was like just so furious about it, so furious. I said, "Well, how can you do this?" And right away people said, "It was done. It was done by the department heads, and all you hear is it's just for informational purposes." And I said, "But it can't be. You can't take the money. You can't do that. You had no public hearings." Everybody got really quiet and they said, "Oh, public hearing wasn't necessary." I said, "Yes, it was." Then I had the head of the Department of Mental Health get up, who was Latino, and he was the only Latino department head for L.A. County at that time. There was two other Latinas on the commission and they were both, like, telling me and writing me notes, "Don't attack him. Don't put him on the

truth table." And I was like, "Well, I want to know what happened here." So when he came forward, I said, "What happened and how did you do this? You didn't have a public hearing." And he kept trying to tell me, "Yes, yes, we didn't have to have a public hearing." And I was just so bothered by it that I did some research and found out that, in fact, there was a bill that was passed by a woman legislator in the seventies that addressed public hearings and that when you were doing certain maneuvers, you had to have public hearings before you did them. Her name was Leona Egeland. So at the next meeting I said, "There is, and it's this bill," and blah, blah, blah, "and it was passed and you have to do it. So you have to put the money back." I mean, it was a drag-out public fight, a drag-out public fight, and so he more or less told me I didn't know what I was talking about. So then the next meeting I had the former assemblywoman at the meeting to explain her bill. [laughs] So then, of course, everybody was like, "Oh, my god." [Los Angeles] County Counsel knew from the beginning that I was correct, but just in a two-month period of speaking out on behalf of the children and Department of Children's Services created such—like, "You can't do that. You're not supposed to do that." And I said, "Well, wait a minute. Our charter says we're a watchdog commission. It doesn't say we're a rubber-stamp commission. So for a watchdog commission, we're supposed to be watching out. And it seems to me when you take all this money from children that were intended and you don't even put it in mental health children, you're putting it in the general budget, it's not right." So it's interesting that you have to really pick your battles and really decide at some point if you're going to be quiet or not. I think less on the Women's Commission, because everyone thought alike, but on the Children's Services Commission there was just more diversity in thought and more diversity in putting a lot of faith in the county, that early on I decided that I was not going to observe the accepted protocol.

HUNT

So I want to go on to a couple things because I think you've said a lot of interesting things about the dynamics of how

these things work. So one of the things you said was, talking about the Women's Commission, you got the feeling that the expectation was women representing certain groups would try to advocate for their group.

SEWELL

Right.

HUNT

Can you think of what stereotypical expectations they might have had for you as a Latina?

SEWELL

Yes. One that I particularly remember is that, oh, I had to think of some kind of program that would encourage Latina women to take birth control. It was like, "Well, why do I have to do that, and what makes you think that Latina women are against birth control and don't want to have birth control?" "Wow, you have so many children. You just have so many children." And I said, "But I don't think that has a lot to do with whether or not you're advocating taking birth control. I think it's a personal decision that some people want to have big families." The birth control issue was big, and to me, it was another way of—it reminded me of the Comisión lawsuit against Madrigal v. Quilligan. That was sterilization, but it was like, "Oh, you have to be sterilized. Oh, you have to take birth control." It's still the same process of thought.

HUNT

So it's still an issue of trying to control the fertility of this group.

SEWELL

Yes, yes, and it was like I had a lot of objections to that. I just wouldn't fall into the trap. I said, "If you want to get a special program together for birth control, please be my guest. I'm not going to do it."

HUNT

And do you remember any of the hot issues for other groups, like what white women were supposed to be concerned about or black women?

SEWELL

Yes. Because it was the city of Pasadena, at the time the black population was still pretty substantial here; I think it was 20 percent. And it was, "Well, we have to really think about the number of black women that are on welfare and why are they on welfare." It was like, "Okay. Well, let's see. How many other women are on and what is their ethnic background?" Those of us that would get ticked off by that, that's how we would address it. We would turn it around and say, "Well, okay, are you going to take up why so many white women are on welfare in the city of Pasadena? I mean, we should just be thinking about women and what things are happening in their lives that make it necessary for them to go on welfare, not breaking it down by groupings." We really had a lot of objections. They were always on the stereotypic things. Maybe that's just how people thought. Yes, obviously it was just how people thought.

HUNT

So was there a stereotype associated with the white women in the group?

SEWELL

No.

HUNT

Because they were just neutral somehow or didn't have special concerns?

SEWELL

Yes, somehow there was not any really overall special concern.

HUNT

Interesting.

SEWELL

I always just really try to really focus everything and bring it back to all women. How is this affecting all women? How does this affect all children? It was not necessary for us to break it down this way. At that time, the Latino population in Pasadena was only 10 percent or something. Now we're the majority. So as the population increased, I'm sure then there were instances where you had to have special programming for families, not necessarily women, for families, especially when it came to dealing with the schools. I really feel that.

But health, I mean, if you want to get into those kinds of subjects, and I would bring it up, especially maternal health among Latinas was always very good. We didn't have all the scary numbers we have now. At that time, they were good numbers and now they're not so hot. The number of infants getting sick and the number of infants dying and everything is problematic.

HUNT

Another of the stories that you mentioned was for the L.A. County Commission. Family Services, was it?

SEWELL

Children and Family Services.

HUNT

You mentioned there being a Latino man who was at what level?

SEWELL

Department head.

HUNT

And basically you wanted to object to something that was happening because you disagreed with what was actually happening.

SEWELL

Exactly.

HUNT

And then two Latina members of the board came to you or discouraged you from going forward. Did you feel like that was an internal movement, like they felt like you were a Latina woman, you should be loyal to him?

SEWELL

Yes. It was totally—we needed to be loyal to him and not put him on the hot seat and not embarrass him, and accept what was being told to us because he was Latino and he was a department head, and there were no other department heads that were Latino and he really wouldn't do anything that would harm Latino children. And I just thought it was preposterous. It was, like, ridiculous.

HUNT

Did anyone from any other background come to you and discourage you from doing anything?

SEWELL

No, no, no, none. None did. In fact, at that time I became very friendly with Nancy Daly [Riordan], who later married Mayor [Richard] Riordan, and Stacey Winkler, who were two white women. They were real lefties and they would say, "Say what you want to say. Don't hold back." So they were always good friends on the commission and I felt that we shared very similar views. I thought it was interesting because one came from entertainment. Her husband was Henry Winkler, is Henry Winkler, and the other one, she was from entertainment, too. Her husband at the time was Bob [Robert] Daly, the head of Warner Bros., so they had pretty kind of privileged lives. And I guess because of their privilege, they really—who could take anything away from them, right? They were going to earn the same amount of money and do the same things and move in the same social circles. But they were women who I truly admired because they were very concerned about the whole and not pieces of the whole.

HUNT

And what did that look like on the ground? What kinds of things were they doing that communicated that feeling to you?

SEWELL

We were all very involved with MacLaren Hall, which at that time was where children who had not yet committed a crime, but were on the verge of it, they were what we call "push-out" children, that as teens, the parents pushed them out of the house and they had nowhere to go, so they went to MacLaren Hall, or if they were younger children—there was quite a bit of younger children—the parents had been neglectful of them. It was run like the children had done something wrong, so it had a very kind of jail kind of mentality to it. The doors were locked to the facility. There were very strict rules. They had to wear what looked like prison garb. Everybody was wearing the same outfit. And there was a school on the grounds. It was a horrible place for all the children that were there, and we just raised holy hell about it, that they had to unlock the facility. We went at

night to see what was happening, because people in the facility and that worked in the facility, some people would call us at home and tell us, "Look. Last night at ten o'clock they hosed down the kids that were giving them a hard time." And this is not a probation facility. So we'd go there and try to catch them in the act. The baby cribs, they had complete netting over them so the baby could never stand up in the crib because the netting would be hitting its head. It was very meshed, so it was more like screening. It was just a horrid place. We raised enough fuss that the department head, at the time, of Children's Services, Lola Hobbs, went to County Board Supervisor [Peter] Schabarum, and they tried to forbid us from going in. He decided that of the three of them, I guess he seen me as the one that he could most attack because my husband worked at the county and [unclear] afraid. My husband worked for [Los Angeles County Department of] Health Services. So he called me. He had his staff people call me, and they told me that my husband had been a good employee and he should be able to, at some point in his career, enjoy retirement. And I said, "Are you threatening me? Are you just threatening me?" "No, no, no, no, no. We were just discussing things with you, and you really have to cool it." I just went ballistic, so I called the press. [laughs] I called the news media, and they were there full circle. They were like, "What?" Apparently there was, like, a baseball or softball game that next day—that was a Friday and Saturday—between Schabarum's staff and one of the departments, and he really misbehaved as a supervisor at this softball game. He knocked over a woman, and she happened to be Latina, so the press was like, "Is he so frustrated at Commissioner Serrano Sewell that he's attacking Latinas on the baseball field?" [laughs] It got a little out of hand, but it was sort of funny at the same time. I found a friend in Supervisor [Michael] Antonovich, who is a conservative. He's real conservative, but he really, really to this day cares a lot about what happens to children. He's really a fighter for equal access and he advocates for children. He went there one night and found them hosing the kids down, and he hit the roof. So we worked closely with his

staff and him, and MacLaren Hall became an open facility. The kids were allowed to wear their own clothing. The group that Nancy Daly and Stacey Winkler had been working with, but under very strict restrictions, United Friends of the Children, became a better group because they were able to do what they wanted there at the facility and provide the children with extra things that they needed, and the whole atmosphere changed. Eventually, after I left the commission, MacLaren Hall was shut down. It's no longer in existence. So that was a very interesting experience, and, again, making the decision what was right was right and what's wrong was wrong, you're in a position that you were given, to be an advocate and to be a watchdog, and you had no choice but to speak up about what was wrong. I always felt disappointed in those commissioners who, for whatever reason, couldn't find it in themselves to do that.

HUNT

Did you feel like working just within the confines of the commission gave you enough power to do the things you needed to do, or did you always need to be reaching beyond?

SEWELL

No, what happened is that because I questioned things early on, and then I got in this public fight with Curos [phonetic], the department head, that staffers in the Department of Children's Services started calling me at home and giving me information. They were—what do you call them—little whistleblowers. And they were really good, because they would mail here to the house the complete facts, what happened completely and what it was against, and they would cite what regulation it was against. So whenever I went, I was always really prepared. Of course, everybody figured that people were feeding me information, but I never copped to it. I would never ever cop to it. So you have people with really good intentions and really wanting things to be done correctly, but I think when it's your job, you become more hesitant and you try to find other ways. So I was glad that I was able to serve that role for about six years, and then I resigned out of the commission. I didn't

serve the second term four years. I resigned. It became too much.

HUNT

So it sounds like the experience you've had on the two commissions were quite different, but I think you alluded to the fact that the commissions are created with stated intentions in mind, but people have different expectations with what will really happen as a result.

SEWELL

Yes, and I think that, too, commissions, to me, for the most part, are pretty rubber-stamp. The Children's Services Commission, I failed to say, was initiated for Los Angeles County by Nancy Daly and Stacey Winkler because the problems they were having with United Friends of the Children trying to be supportive of children in county facilities. So because they were behind it, they made sure that the word "watchdog" was included in the description of the commission. I don't think most commissions are formed that way. They're formed to address a need. But I don't know, my experience has been that a lot of times people see being put on a commission as a part of your social status. You're an important person when you're on this commission, and that's about where it ends. Because when I was on the Resources and Allocation Commission also it was like that. We were in charge of the block grants and made recommendations to the city of Pasadena of where the block grant money should go, but there was staff, so the staff had already done all the work, and they would hand you a list and you were supposed to rubber-stamp the list. Well I was like, "Well, why are we giving money to this group, and why so much, and what's their track record, and what have they done? I pretty much follow what commissions are doing, and you always have a couple people on there, whatever commission it is, that aren't following the group, just to do what the staff wants to be done for that commission.

HUNT

So, switching gears a little bit, Centro de Niños.

SEWELL

My love and my passion. It was founded by Comisión.

HUNT

That was in ’72?

SEWELL

1972. Interesting enough, it was put together by all single women who had a vision in their head that they had this childcare center and they had this women’s training through the Chicano Service Action Center for women in nontraditional jobs, and so they could put their children here and they just seen it as glorified babysitting. They didn’t see it as anything beyond that. The first year it was up, the first six months, it ran into just all kinds of problems because the person that was hired as its director had a child-development background, but had no common sense about how to run a budget or to do any of that. So it ran into tremendous problems. So I was at a meeting. They were voting to not ask for a renewal of the funds from the state. This was, like, in May and the contract ended June 30th. So July 1st starts a new budget, and they were voting not to ask for it again because it was just too much more problems than they had anticipated. I had my two kids in tow with me, and I’m like, “What are you saying? I mean, that’s crazy. Just because this person didn’t know how to do it,” and blah, blah, blah. I’m raising holy hell. Then one of the officers said, “Well, if you think you can do it, you do it.” Mind you, I had one year of community college, no background in child development, no background in business, and they’re telling me, “You take it.” I was, like, stunned. I was so stunned that they said that. Somebody made a motion, and it was passed and the whole thing. I’m like, “Oh, no. What am I going to do?” I knew I was not prepared. And then I said, “Oh, well, I’ll just look at it like I look at my household budget.” So that’s basically what I did. The first year was rough. I found out about a community involvement group from Occidental Life Insurance that their employees could get involved with. They would assign them to various nonprofits and they would come in with their expertise. If it was accounting that they needed, they would teach them and set up the books and do all that kind of stuff. I heard about it, so I said, “Wow.” So I called them up. So they sent down this accountant, and he

and I didn't hit it off. We just, like, really didn't hit it off. He asked to see the expenditures and stuff like that. I had everything organized in shoeboxes, like, everything that I spent for food, everything I spent for salaries. I had them all in shoeboxes because I really, at that point, didn't know about a ledger, didn't know about anything. So he came in and he did everything to belittle me, and I told him to get the fuck out. I said, "Just get the fuck out of here. That's why you're here, to teach me how to do this, and I don't need you coming here to belittle me. So take your stuff and get the fuck out of here. I don't need you."

HUNT

Were there many programs running like that at the time that were supposed to kind of help to—

SEWELL

I don't know. I don't know. I just knew about them. So apparently, he went back, he went back to this meeting of the people that were the volunteers over at Occidental [College] and said, oh, he had a horrible experience at this place called Centro de Niños, and, "The woman there was an absolute bitch and she told me to get the fuck out." So one of the members there, who is an attorney, said, "Well, what happened? How come that happened? I mean that's unusual that somebody would say, 'Get the fuck out.'" He said, "Well, you were being condescending to her. You were being insulting to her." He was African American. So he said, "Let me go out there and see what I can do." So he calls me on the phone, and I said, "If you're anything like this other jerk, save your time and my time. I don't need you." He said, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no." He said, "I went to high school in East L.A. I was raised in Ramona Gardens [Housing Project]," and then he gave me a little bit of his background. I said, "Oh, okay. Well, come on down." So he came the next day and we hit it off immediately. He came on the board, and today, all these years later, he's still on the board. He's the chairperson of my board.

HUNT

So what was different about your interaction with him?

SEWELL

Well, one, he treated me as an equal, immediately treated me as an equal, and he saw the wider picture of the necessity of a childcare center and that we could build it into more than just a childcare center, an actual child-development center. He was just all the time very, very supportive. So we grew from one center to two centers, and we have a training component. We have a great reputation. This year in June, our thirty-eighth class will be graduating out of the school, and I will be celebrating my thirty-eighth anniversary with them, too, at the same time. So it's been quite a ride. We've gone from not knowing anything to becoming pretty much experts on what was going on, and realizing that my background was—I think I'm more of a thinker and more of an initiator of getting people involved in things, and a strategic planner. I'm very strategic in how I plan, and so that was my role. I hired a program director to work directly with the children and the teachers that had the credentials to do that, and it's worked out. The division has worked out really well. I'm proud to say we have a very, very good reputation. I get these—my staff calls them my madcap ideas. Well, six years ago I said one of the centers that was being rehabbed by HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development], some grant money I was able to obtain with the county Housing Authority, so I said, "Well, I want this to have a rainforest theme, and the curriculum is going to be on the rainforest and it's going to be on saving the Earth and all this ecology stuff. I want to start a program called Niños Earth Centro and it's going to be to educate the parents on how to be more ecology-minded. We're going to have workshops for them." I did this whole three-year program just working directly with parents and empowering them, and having legislative staff come to meet with them and tell them if they had something that needed to be addressed in their neighborhood, how they could get it addressed. So it was very empowering for the parents, very empowering for the staff, and very empowering for children. You can only show people the tools and give them information. You can't empower them. They have to empower themselves. I really believe that, and I think there's not enough people that

understand that whole dynamic, that there's so many people that are in positions that they can create change that think they are empowering people, and they're not. The people are empowering themselves, certainly with information you've made available to them or people you've made available to them, but it's not successful when it's the other way.

HUNT

Right.

SEWELL

It builds up the whole "I'm better than you" situation. "I know more than you." And when it comes down to it, a lot of times people have such different takes on what the problem is and why the problem occurred, that they can bring forward their own solutions, and when they realize they can bring forward their own solutions, it's like seeing kids in a candy store. They get so excited, "Oh, yeah, I can do that. That's really true. Well, if I want to get the newspapers here, how do I do it?" And then you give them that information on how to do it, and that's how it works. We had a group of parents at our other site that was involved with the whole controversy around Belmont High School, the new Belmont High School, and the fact that there was supposed to be toxic stuff on the site. Some parents have felt very strongly that it shouldn't be built and that certain steps should be taken before it was built, and those families were able to stop it from where it was when it started and certain mitigation happened. It was just a group of everyday, quote, unquote, "undereducated" people who brought that forth. We had a whole daylong conference on the subject and we invited people from LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District] and we invited state legislators to be there to listen to the families and to be part of our panels. I went to the school district and I said, "You need to lend us all your earphones." They said, "No, we don't. We don't have to lend—." And I said, "Yeah, you do, and you have to lend us your little machine so that we can have a translator who can translate for these families." "Nope, we don't have to do that." I said, "Yes, you do because your people are coming to give presentations and my families won't understand a word

of what they're saying." So I backed them into a corner and they said, "Okay." So they lent us, like, 150 earphones, and we had a translator there who was translating what was being said. It really worked out really, really well. We had, at the time, Senator Martha Escutia, who was doing a lot of environmental stuff, Lucille Roybal-Allard, the congresswoman, and we had another senator, but I can't remember his name right now. But it was just a great example of how people took a concern and were able to create some action, not completely to their satisfaction in the end, but to get enough assurances that they felt safer about the subject. Also, you have to give people information so they'll learn, so it's a teaching situation on what actions you might be doing as a human being that creates problems in our environment. So I had a speaker come in who was working with the factories that are on the border, who get all their waste and throw it into the river and contaminate the drinking water for people in Mexico. People were, like, shocked that that was happening right there in their little village, and they became active around that subject. So it was just really, really nice. I remember, too, one speaker I had came in and came in with PowerPoint and all that stuff. It was one of the legislative people. The audience was pretty much in the dark about what they were doing. Then I said, "How many people are even familiar with computers?" Nobody in the room of 125 people had ever put their fingers on a computer. They were oblivious that you could get information through the Internet in Spanish, and I was just like, "Oh, my god." At that time, to get a computer and everything—that's just like twelve years ago—it was still pretty costly. You were talking about $2,000 to $2,500 to get a computer, and so I said, "Oh, my god. I have to get computers made available at a price that they can afford them, and this is just a whole new world for them." So we had fundraisers, and I went and talked to Staples [office supply company], and I talked to—what's his name—Bill Gates' people. Eventually, any family that wanted to have a computer could have one for $500.

HUNT

Wow.

SEWELL

We had something like eighty families who went off with their computers, and that was great. It was a great thing. So the things besides taking care of children and giving them tools to think, to work out solutions, even at a young age, the extra things we do with families is just so much fun and brings out all your creative juices and help make better communities. That's the bottom line. This last year with President [Barack] Obama's wife [Michelle Obama] becoming involved with the obesity issue. Of course, among Latino children the obesity issue is a big issue. Among white children it's something like three out of every ten are obese. Among Latino children is something like five out of every ten. You know, obesity leads to diabetes, heart problems, all these health ills. So I said, how does somebody like me bring the subject up that's real touchy for the families because culturally we believe a fat child is a healthy child? How do I bring this up? I have to bring it up. So I wrote a small proposal to the California Wellness Foundation and got funded for it. One of the people that I happened to know that is very admired in the Latina community, Spanish-speaking Latina community, is Dr. Alicia Lifshitz. She's a Mexican Jew, born in Mexico, Ashkenazi Jew. She's a petite woman, a beautiful woman, sort of movie-starish qualities about her, blonde hair, blue eyes, very fair-skinned. She's a lovely, lovely, lovely woman, but she has a lot of physical attributes that people are drawn to, and when you meet her and speak to her, you're even more drawn to her. So I had met her numerous times and I had an occasion to work with her husband on some subjects, so I called her up. She's a physician. I said, "This is a real issue, as you know." And she said, "Yes." I said, "I want to have three or four workshops. Can you do the first workshop?" And she said, "Of course I can do it." She's a monthly contributor to Spanish People Magazine [People en Español]. She's written a number of books. She has a health segment once a week on Spanish-language TV. She has a radio show on Saturday mornings on Spanish language, KMEX-Radio, so she's pretty well known

throughout the country. And she lives here, thankfully, in Los Angeles. So we made a big sign and put it out front, and we had over two hundred people show up. It was supposed to only be for my families, which is eighty families, and people were so anxious to see her. She knows her popularity. Her husband created a website for her that Johnson and Johnson has helped to fund. They had photographs of her made up into little giveaway photographs. She brought her photographs and she had already signed them. But she spoke and she brought up the subject. She says, "These are the dangers," and she spoke for two hours straight. I didn't have anybody get up, go to the restroom. I mean, one woman broke down and talked about her son who ended up getting diabetes and he died. She was very compassionate. I mean, it was just like an old-fashioned love-in. After, everybody lined up because they wanted her photograph, so then she stayed and personalized each one. So it was great. So I was able then to break into this whole subject. So the next time I had people from the new farmers' market that was in East L.A. and I had a nutritionist come from Cal State L.A. [California State University, Los Angeles] and talk about the kind of food that culturally we like to eat, and how you can prepare it so that it's healthier. Then the last segment is I tried to get somebody from 24 Hour Fitness, but I don't think they viewed our families as income-potential eligible for their gym, so I couldn't get them hooked in. But I got a yoga instructor hooked in, and I thought, oh, just no way are they going to relate to yoga. I mean, they're just going to be totally embarrassed to do this. So I said to the staff, "Okay, we'll start with the kids and we'll start doing yoga things with the kids." So I ran out and bought this Yoga for Kids and DVDs and just all kinds of things, and books, and big huge flashcards that showed children in all the positions. The kids had a blast with it, and so then the night for the parents to do it, we had about half as many parents show up. About only fifty parents showed up. We were in the gym at the park next door to us. So the yoga instructor was saying, like, "Okay, everybody get up." So then everybody got up, and "We're going to do this," and none of the parents would do it.

None of the parents would do it. This poor woman tried every which way to get the parents to do it, and they were like, "No. No. No, sitting on the floor that way with your legs in those positions is very unladylike. No, no, no, no, no, but we'll listen to what you say and we'll watch you." [laughs] So I was sitting there, like, "Oh, my god," but we were watching their children because it was in the evening. We provide childcare for the children. So I ran over to the staff and said, "Bring the kids," so the kids came over and the kids were doing it. And then the kids naturally will say, "Mommy, Mommy, you need to do this. You need to do this." So then the parents start doing it because their children were doing it. And they didn't want to disappoint their children and then they got into it. It was, like, it took us forty-five minutes to get there and we only had about an hour left, but we did get there. And maybe later some of the parents will do it more with their children at home. What I also want to say, it's also really important, no matter what community you're working in or what economical level people are in, is to never assume that they cannot shed light onto a subject or that they don't have a desire to give also. I think oftentimes those of us that are in better economic situations look at poor communities and just see them as the recipient of good deeds and donations, and don't look at them as what can we create so that they're also giving, because we don't think that way. We don't think that poorer people have something to give, in general, whether it be something that they have in their home, whether it be thoughts, whether it be solutions. We just don't look at people that way, and that's a real hindrance to our development.

HUNT

One thing that I think sounds really interesting is that there's been this progression. So it sounds like the original idea was to serve women by caring for their children, allow women to develop certain skills or talents or have time to do things for themselves and their families. So how incrementally or instantly did the center grow from, "We're providing a service to women," to, "We're providing this amazing child-

development curriculum to being the convener in the community"?

SEWELL

The child-development curriculum took, real honestly, ten years. We were a little better than custodial care, but that one was trying to find the right fit. I worked with Pacific Oaks [College]. Not having a formal education in that area, I depended a lot on what kind of parent I was and what kind of views I had towards life. My kids went to open schools and they went to schools that didn't give them grades all their early years. It wasn't until they were in junior high school did they go to a school with grades, and so I tried to find staff that didn't look at education traditionally. When you get kids, young people, because our salaries were so low, just coming right out of the community colleges or Cal State, the colleges, they're all coming with all their book learning, and most of them were young single people and they didn't have the experience of being mothers. When you're younger, you think you know everything. Well, certainly I was there. I mean, I was pretty young then and I was, "This is the only way it's going to be." So it took a good ten years for that to develop. The other aspect of respecting the families of the community that we were servicing, that happened within three years. That happened pretty quickly where we were doing extra things that we weren't required to do within our budget and our funding source. It wasn't in all the guidelines of the rules and regulations of the State Department of Education. In fact, I got in trouble at one point because everyone had control over their own budget, all right, and the whole issue of discipline came up. Every agency that was funded by the state, you had control over your own budget, and the issue of how we were going to deal with discipline and how we were dealing with discipline came up. So Latinos, for the most part, practice corporal punishment, and I was raised that way. I mean, you get a good smack, you know. I was a commissioner for Children's Services and I have to say I smacked my kids. I'm not proud of it now, now that I look back on it and say, "Oh, my god, how did I do that? That was just so wrong." But I knew enough that I had

to have some respect for the families and what they thought, and I knew we couldn't be smacking the kids. [laughs] So I brought a Latino expert from Cal State; I paid her. I formed a parent disciplinary group and it was six parents. There was a big meeting and they all voted for who should be on it, and my Cal State persons and my parents all got paid the same consulting fee. At that time, it was $25 an hour. When the state—they come and do these reviews just to see if they can catch you doing something and they don't tell you when they're going to come. They just show up at your doorstep. The reviewer saw the notice and said, "Oh, what's this?" And I explained to her and I said, "We're trying to figure out a disciplinary program." She said, "Oh, that's really interesting. Who are you using?" When I told her I was paying parents, she had a fit and said, "You can't pay parents." And I said, "Why?" She said, "They're not qualified." I said, "Well, what do you mean they're not qualified? They're parents." "No, no, no, no. They're not educationally qualified. No, no, no, no. You cannot have them making policies." I said, "Well, they're going to come forward with some suggestions. Right now the policy is you put the kids on time-out, but there's a lot of questions around how long should a time-out be. If the kid's not familiar with time-out in their home, how are they going to adjust to time-out here? We have a kid, we put him on time-out, and they're going crazy." "No, no, no, no, you can't." So I got written up on it. And, Jesus, I had to go through all this hassle. I had to go up to Sacramento and hassle with the department and convince them that these parents had a right to be paid for their time. Their time was no different from the Cal State person. The Cal State person wasn't a parent. They didn't have any children. So that was a real interesting situation, and, as I was told, I was the first agency in California that paid parents. After that, I mean everybody knew about it and so then people started hiring their parents for certain things. It's, again, an example, assuming that because they're poor and they're parents and they're undereducated, that they shouldn't have a right to develop policy. It's like it seemed sort of crazy to me.

HUNT

So doing the work that you do, how do you know when you're doing a good job? How do you know when the center's doing a good job?

SEWELL

Well, when we were at our Loma site and we used to keep our own waiting list, I knew because I had a waiting list of three thousand names. So I knew, right? Five years ago that system changed. The state created a centralized waiting list for every county. It's called the CEL [Centralized Eligibility List], and in Los Angeles it's called LACEL [Los Angeles Centralized Eligibility List]. I just, like, had a fit when it was created. I said, "This is never going to work. This system is never going to work." I don't even know how much money they dumped into it. Each county has a setup. Each county has tremendous staff and somebody comes from the outside and they say, "I want childcare services here." In the past, we'd just put them in our book, put them on our waiting list. Now they have to fill out a form, and then we have to enter the form into the Centralized Waiting List. So everybody's name in L.A. County gets pulled into one waiting list, and so whoever has an opening in L.A. County goes to the Centralized Waiting List. You say, "I have an opening for a four-year-old," and then it spits out four-year-old names to you. You say, "Well, I'm only in this zip code," and that'll tie it down into only parents that are in this zip code. But that doesn't work all the time because you can't do it all the time, and because LAUSD is so bad that once you pick up a family, you're supposed to remove them from the list, and LAUSD doesn't do that. So we would get all these names that LAUSD was servicing in their child-development centers, and I was just so pissed about it. I hate the system. I hate it. I hate it. So that's one of a bunch of cuts. They're gone as of July 1.

HUNT

So what will mean?

SEWELL

That means that we get to go back to our own waiting list. So I start hearing about this, that that's what was going to happen, and I said, "Oh, okay." I started hearing about it in January, so I called my administrative staff together and I

said, "We're going to start creating our own list. Still plug in the information, and when you take it, explain to them, 'It's going to a centralized waiting list, but we're keeping our own list because we believe that there's going to be some changes. Do you want to be on our list?'" "No, no, I only want you." Or the other way that was—there was a box that you could check that if you wanted only a certain center. And so most of the people that came in—and we would have, like, on the low number, ten people a week requesting services, and nine out of ten people would say, "No, I only want to be here." So I know we're doing a good job, and so I already have my waiting list going. Two weeks ago, we got a notification, while I was ill, and they came to the hospital with it and they said, "Here, as of May 15th, we can start our own waiting list." I said, "See, we're ahead of the game." [laughs]

HUNT

It might cheer you up too.

SEWELL

Yes.

HUNT

So what do you think draws people?

SEWELL

First of all, I think it's because it's such a lovely center. We did the rainforest theme, environmental theme for five years, and then I changed it to outer space. So if you go in the center, everything's outer space. We have replica of planets hanging from the ceilings. We have a Space Shuttle in one of the classrooms. I mean it's just all that way. Our kids, we take them every year with the parents to JPL's [Jet Propulsion Laboratory] open house, and JPL's always freaked out because we have three- and four-year-olds saying, "Oh, I know that planet. That planet is Mercury," just being little encyclopedias. It's a real fun day with the families because they get to see the Mars Rover and they get to see all kinds of neat stuff. So people know we're doing that. When I change themes, I also develop curriculum and make it available to other centers. We have a listing, and we send them and we say, "Okay, to be on our list and to get a

curriculum every month, it's going to cost you twenty bucks," because we have mailing costs. So people sign up and do it. And we have an annual food giveaway. Just this last weekend I was there on Saturday from six in the morning till one o'clock, and yesterday I was there from six to twelve, because our budget, we're hearing, is going to be cut 25 percent. We're going to lose over $500,000, and it's devastating for us. So, you know, I put on my thinking cap and think, okay, I can't look at it as $500,000. I have to look at it in a way that families can identify with, because they sure aren't going to identify with $500,000. I mean, I know I'm going to have to cut staff. So I said, "Okay, we're going to have a yard sale." So I start planning this yard sale, like, two months ago and I framed it as, "The community needs to raise milk money for the kids for six months over these two days." We had a big milk bottle. We did a big thing of a milk bottle, like the temperature thing, we filled it with milk, the lines that showed milk being filled up. And people of the community related to it. So we didn't have a downtime at all. I just got the report this morning. Over two days we made $11,000 for a yard sale. I mean, that's incredible to make that on a yard sale, and we had a lot of people donating to us because that's how I sold it, too, because last year I was crying wolf because, oh, last year, the cuts were going to be so bad and it's the first time we had any cuts. It was really, really rough. And the legislature not signing the budget on time, we never got money from the state until October, so we went July, August, September, half of October with no money. Staff actually came forward. A staff person actually came forward. This woman works for us in the kitchen. She cleans houses on weekends. She had $20,000 in savings and came and said, "I'll lend it to you, because we have to keep the doors open." And staff said, "Well, we'll work for half as much if we can get the money when we do have money and figure out what we're going to do." So last year it was like I was desperate, and people in the community, the greater community, Candy Spelling and other people got us through the summer months that we were able to operate. It's like you can't cry wolf too many times to the same people. So I

said, "Okay." So that's how I'm trying to frame everything. "Okay, so I'll be able to report, okay, that's a year's worth of milk and that's a year of the phone bill." So I'm looking at everything very piecemeal now because, otherwise, people can't relate to it. It's the old UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] thing, "This penny will inoculate ten million kids." It's the same thought process, and it works. People are able to relate. Otherwise, it becomes too big, and "I'm a little person. How in the world can I help?" So that was fun.

HUNT

So it sounds like there's some really tough stuff coming in the immediate future just dealing with state budgeting and all that stuff, but what do you see for the longer-term future of the center and your involvement?

SEWELL

Well, I think, first of all, I only have about five more years left in me. Then I would like to retire out. I think the budget problem is the biggest problem, and I think it's going to be a good five years before the state sees itself out of this monetary mess. So as I explain to staff, "We have a job to do, and just because we have no money doesn't mean that we can't do our job. You might not be able to work for a reduced salary, and I understand that. You have to feed your own families. But my job is to keep these doors open, to provide the service to the families, and to ensure that we do the very best job that the tools give us and that our knowledge gives us." Because the money is the tool, but you can't suppress what you learned on how and what children need to grow and grow healthy. So I can't pretend that the kids aren't going to go through $500 worth of materials in a month. That's the real problem, so I have to figure that out and I'm working at it. I just don't see the center closing. We're going to celebrate our thirty-ninth year, thirty-eight years of kids graduating out, so I'm hoping that we'll be here for fifty years.

HUNT

So I'm sure we could talk about the center all day because it's obvious the way you kind of light up and have so many things tumbling through your head all at once, but it sounds

like throughout your life you've been a doer, you've been an activist, you've been making things happen. Do you see the center as part of your work?

SEWELL

Oh, yes, most definitely. Yes, I see it, and I see it as an opportunity to create in a formalized setting, in a quote, unquote, "respectable" setting, in a known setting, other people who will do things, other people who will contribute to better communities, and all under the auspices of the center. It's happened in so many different ways. I had one child, he was Japanese, he came only speaking Japanese. We hired his mother, and he was there. He came in when he was two and he left when he was five, and two years ago I went to his graduation at [University of California] Berkeley. He graduated with a Ph.D. in language acquisition. His whole thing was on how children gain another language when you only speak one language and what steps you need to go through. I mean, he's a perfect Spanish speaker. It was just such a joy to see him, because his mom gave him a party up there and he said that it was his experience at Centro de Niños that led him to this. I had a child who went through the whole environmental thing, who now works for an environmental agency in San Diego. I've had staff that I had to literally kick out and say, "You've done seven years here. You've got to leave us. We don't have a retirement fund. You've got to leave us. You've got to try to get into a school district where you're going to have a retirement fund, where you're going to have all these things." The head of all the child development for Hacienda Heights is my former director. She came to me when she was seventeen, didn't have a supportive family, got married when she was nineteen and divorced him. She always jokes, "I divorced two husbands because they didn't like you." [laughs] I said, "No, they didn't like what you turned into because you turned into a woman who wanted more education and a woman who wanted to do things. They weren't married to me; they were married to you." She's raised two children who have graduated from college and are doing things. So I see it every day. I see every day people who we've touched

their lives and they've changed. We had a child come back, came from a really poor family. Aaron Spelling, when he was alive, he had donated for one of our auctions a walk-on part to Beverly Hills [90210] whatever, whatever that was, so one of our kids got the walk-in part. Actually, somebody else bid for it and they paid something like $2,000 for it, and they gave it to one of our children who was there that day and said, "Here, you can have it. I don't want the walk-on part." So the kid went and the kid ended up ending up with a lot of different roles. They left us, and then they came back a few years later and came back with a $5,000 check to give us because they wanted to thank us because look at all these little bitty parts that's sustaining his family and everything. So it's neat. It keeps giving and growing and growing. That was a poor family and they learned that they could give. So everybody can give.

HUNT

I don't know if you're into labels or that kind of thing, but what kind of words would you use to describe yourself in your role? Are you an activist? Are you a feminist?

SEWELL

I still think I'm a humanist. Yes, I'm a feminist, but more so a humanist. I'm all of those things. I'm an activist. I'm a crybaby sometimes. I'm just a number of things, but I think the most apropos one would be a motivator. I think I have the ability to motivate people. I don't know what you call it. A person that creates change. At least that's how I want to be remembered, as those, as a motivator and a person who wants to create change.

HUNT

So is there advice that you have for people wanting to do things similar to what you've been able to accomplish, even if not in quite the same path?

SEWELL

Never underestimate the person next to you, because you don't know what they can bring to the table. And those people who disagree with you, listen to them very carefully because they also have many thoughts to bring to the table and will also give you insight onto how to approach a subject

that you might disagree on, how to strategize. I listen to conservative radio all the time. I listen to that crazy guy [Glenn] Beck, and Rush Limbaugh, and all those crazies. I listen to them. I'll turn on Fox News twice a week and listen to those people because they always get me thinking about how can I present this in a way that people who listen to them will want to listen to me too. I just think we can't underestimate people. You don't know what they're going to bring for you and bring for your community. Have to be open about it.

HUNT

So we've talked about a lot of things going back to Lorain, Ohio, and you spending a lot of time here in Los Angeles and Pasadena. How would what you thought you would achieve and do in life compare to where you are today, what you've accomplished?

SEWELL

I don't think my thought process has changed all that much, because very early on I knew the power of the people. I knew that if people come together and want to create change, they can do it. I knew that real early in my life because of coming from a union family. As to what I've accomplished, I know that sometimes I think, well, it was just the circumstances that you were lucky enough to fall into, but they couldn't have all have been circumstances. I think that I've done my father, who introduced me to unions, and my mother, and their union brothers and sisters, and today's union brothers and sisters, I've done well by them. It's a tough time now for unions, tough time for people who want to be changemakers because people are resistant to change. But it's inevitable. And thank god the end of the world didn't happen two days ago and the rapture didn't come. [laughs]. So I think I've done okay.

HUNT

And is there a universal hope that you have for the children and the families that you serve now, things you most hope for them?

SEWELL

Well, for the children, that they all be good problem solvers, no matter what they do, no matter if they go to higher education or not, that in their lives they will be able to face difficulties and be able to come up with their solutions that will be good solutions and healthy solutions, and the same thing for the families. I think that they will do well if they can do that. The higher goal is they all end up with good jobs and they all end up educated. That's not all going to happen. It's not all going to happen, but if they can be good problem solvers and with good solutions, that's great. That's wonderful. We did our job.

HUNT

Back to you, one last thing. You talked about maybe leaving the center in five years or so. Will that mean retirement? And what might that look like for you?

SEWELL

Yes, my husband's seventy-three, I'm sixty-three. Yes, I'll retire. I just somehow don't see me living out in the desert and not doing anything, so I'll probably end up doing some stuff out in the desert. I've done a few things out there, helped my husband organize a Dr. Seuss birthday party and gave away books to kids. He's involved with the countrywide program called First Book, where they provide books for "underprivileged," quote, unquote, children. I did an art program out there that ran for six months on Saturdays for kids from five to twelve every Saturday and introduced them to all the different European and Mexican masters, and that was a lot of fun. So I'll probably do something like that, write a proposal to do something and give the kids more vision so they can see more things, so they can do more things. When I had the art program, I had a swim party at the house for the kids. I live in a pretty big house. My husband was fortunate enough to be in the county when they had good retirement systems and everything, and my house is 2,600 square feet. One of the little kids said, "Wow, this is a big house. My whole family and my tias and my tio and my grandmother and grandfather and my relatives in Mexico, we could all live in this house." [laughs] I said, "Yes, you could." "Wow." Then he saw the swimming pool and he said, "Is this

a hotel or is this a house?" And I said, "This is a house." I had another kid who said—I had hot dogs and hamburgers and all that pool kind of food, brownies, and he ate half the brownie. And I said, "Oh, you didn't like the brownie?" He says, "No, I'm saving it for my mother." And I said, "Oh, does she like brownies?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, we have extra ones in the house. I'll send her some brownies." He said, "Really? Really? Do I have to pay for it?" I said, "No, you don't have to pay for it. You can just take it to your mom." He said, "Wow." He says, "So I can eat this half?" I said, "Yeah, you can eat that half." [laughs] And he gobbled it down. So, you know, I mean, the kids saw the art in my house, and I said, "This is V_____. That's one of them that we studied about." I think it was good for them. I think it was good for them to see somebody of the same color and of the same ethnic background and that lived in this big house, that had art. I think that was great for them. One little girl, we were learning about [Rufino] Tamayo, and she came to the next class and she had a Spanish-language newspaper. There was a tiny little article in it about a woman, homeless woman who found a Tamayo in the garbage can on the street in New York City. This was three years ago, and it was valued at something like $700,000 or something. She came in and she said, "Look at this article." She said, "My mommy pointed it out to me because that's the artist we were studying." And I said, "Yes, he's a Mexican artist." She was just so excited about it, and I thought, that's great. There's this obscure little article that they found, and she was so excited to bring it in and share it with everybody. So I think you give kids these opportunities, no matter how big or how small, and for the most part, kids will run with them because that's how kids are.

HUNT

Excellent. Thank you, Sandy. [End of May 23, 2011 interview]

Date: 2013-02-28