Oral History with Stephanie Prieto

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Interview of Stephanie Prieto

Session One (8/4/2020)

[00:00:00]

KIM: Okay, sorry. My Zoom kind of changed recently so I think it just started (recording) now. Do you mind if I just got started? Today is August 4, 2020. It's 2:08p.m. and this is Kelsey Kim with the Center for the Study of Women speaking with Stephanie Prieto. Sorry to back up. Can I ask you when and where you were born?

PRIETO: Yes. I was born in 1998. I was born and raised in East Los Angeles, specifically unincluded East Los Angeles. It's in an actual home.

KIM: And I was just asking you, before I realized it wasn't recording, if you could tell me a little bit about your family background? I'm so glad I discovered this right in the beginning and not at the end.

PRIETO: Thankfully it showed up, too, on my screen. So it's me, my older sister, my mom, and my dad. My mom and dad came here as immigrants. My dad in the '70s, my mom in the '80s, established here in East LA within the same neighborhood and they met—Dad worked at the liquor store down the street, and they established basically a home down on the same block where he worked. And that's our house now. My grandma lives across the street. So it's very family oriented. And my sister and I have about a six-year age gap.

KIM: Is your sister older?

PRIETO: Yeah, she's going to be twenty-eight. Yeah.

KIM: Awesome. And does your dad still work at that liquor store?

PRIETO: No actually, he quit that job to learn how to be a mechanic for landscaping machines, like lawn mowers, weed whackers. He has his own business now. So he started as a training mechanic and now he thankfully owns his own little shop.

KIM: Awesome. And what about your mother? What did she do?

PRIETO: So, she was a babysitter originally. That way she could take care of both me and my sister and support with income. But I guess now that we're grown, my mom, she started working with my dad and so she's the cashier and the second head at his shop.

[00:02:46]

KIM: Awesome. And you mentioned that you've lived in the same home your whole life. You've got your grandmother across the street. Do you remember—or not even remember because you're still there. Can you describe what your family house is like?

PRIETO: So when we first—it's very different now compared to when I remember growing up in here just because the house was really torn down. My dad got it really cheap; the amount of property he got super cheap but that's because the house was still the same foundation structure

from when it was built in the 1920s. So our house basically growing up was very thin walls, windows were broken, the old paint—one of the very few houses in East LA that has a basement. So yeah, it's kind of a rare house in the neighborhood. But now it's all remodeled. So the house is the same, what would you say, like structure, but obviously it's new now. So it's a lot safer. Also outside, there's—growing up it used to be –we have a huge front yard, huge backyard. So it used to be a lot of dirt; now it's basically surrounded by just grass and greenery. So a lot of fruit trees.

KIM: And when did you remodel the house?

PRIETO: I want to say the first time I remember it getting remodeled was 2008. Probably about fourteen years after they moved in or bought the house.

KIM: And I know you mentioned lead contamination. Is that related to your house specifically? Or is it more the neighborhood and the community?

PRIETO: I think it has a lot—the yard specifically has a lot to do with it just because where they did the testing was the dirt and there was really high levels of lead contamination within our front and backyard, the soil. And since we do have a lot of fruit trees—that's what we grew up eating—and so we were directly ingesting that lead through the plants. Every time I would go outside as a little kid and play in the grass, my pets playing in the dirt—they'd bring that inside and so I think it has a huge part in how the lead contamination really affected me and my family.

KIM: Yes, I was just curious because I know since you said you were in an older home, with older homes, there's also a lot of lead in the paint.

PRIETO: My neighbor actually yeah, her house was 1950s but they did testing on I believe her paint. I don't know why she hasn't changed it but yeah, the paint on her walls outside, it's still lead contaminated as well.

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KIM: And when did you say the testing was done in your yard?

PRIETO: This was probably 2016 to 2017, I want to say. It might have been the year after. I think it was right after I came back home from my first year of college.

KIM: Okay. I might have missed it, but did you say this was something that your family sought out? Or it was just a routine testing from the local government or something?

PRIETO: No. So that year my sister went, I think she had just gotten a job with East Yard (Communities for Environmental Justice) and also an internship with Liberty Hill. So while they were working on shutting down the Exide factory, Liberty Hill was also trying to get a lot of data to back up the lead contamination. And so one of those things was hiring geologists to come and do soil testing within different homes. And so she basically, since she was already working for them, she volunteered our house, and then that's how we got the results for the lead contamination directly from our soil.

KIM: Okay, I see. Thank you. Can you tell me a little bit more about the neighborhood that you grew up in? I know that's a broad question, but just your experiences there. I know you said that your grandmother lives nearby. Did you visit her a lot as a child? Was it very family oriented?

PRIETO: Yeah, so growing up, my grandma did babysit me a lot. I grew up—it was me and a lot of my cousins in that household. So she was in charge of picking us up after school since it was walking distance. It's right on the other side of the 710 (freeway) since we live right next to it. Growing up, I always had cousins from both my dad's side and then my mom's side was literally on the other side of the block. Yeah, family oriented. Yeah, I had both sides there. Did you want me to talk about the structure of the neighborhood or just family life?

KIM: It's an open-ended question so you can go—I'd love to hear more about whatever you're interested in talking about. So, if it's structure, I'd love to hear more about that.

PRIETO: I think structure wise it's very important also just to (unclear) information and why so many of us do have respiratory issues here. We are literally—right in front of me if I look outside my window is the 710 and the 5 freeway. In the back is the Union Pacific Railroad. And then to the right and the left are refineries. Since we are bordered by Commerce (California) and Boyle Heights, they do get away with a lot of putting refineries so close to homes. So we're surrounded by a lot of those facilities here. And diesel trucks that are always driving on our small residential street when they're not supposed to, but structure wise. Yes, we're surrounded by pollution.

[00:08:43]

KIM: Did you notice anything about the air quality growing up?

PRIETO: Yeah, so I think a lot of fires would happen when we were little whether it'd be diesel trucks or the trucks that transport gasoline on the freeway, there would always be explosions. There would always be ash and they would always have to tell us, "Stay inside. The kids and elderly cannot be going outside because the air quality right now is really bad." We had super poor air quality growing up even in elementary school. In certain summers during heat waves, we'd have to stay within classrooms. We couldn't go outside and play. I think another thing too was there's animal refineries in Vernon (California) which is really close to East LA. And so in the summertime when it gets really hot, around six o'clock, it was like clockwork, you would start smelling the smell of them burning animal fats and it was a really bad smell. And to this day, you still smell it but I think they regulated the times that they can do it a little bit more. But growing up those were the two smells that I consistently remembered smelling – the main chemicals that would surround our neighborhood.

KIM: You had mentioned in school you sometimes—there are some days where you can't even go outside. I wanted to hear a little bit more about what school was like for you because we are interested in a person's life history. So I just want to hear a little bit more about your background.

PRIETO: Well my elementary school, Ford Boulevard, like I said, it's walking distance. It was literally right across the street from the 710. So I think not until later on in life I realized that's dangerous – you're putting a bunch of kids so close to that. We didn't have an actual yard, so it

was all asphalt. So in the summer, you get—the effects of heat were really bad. I remember from the faucets – I didn't understand why until I guess now—we would have to do the whole, count thirty seconds before drinking out of the fountains. At some points we weren't allowed to drink out of the fountains because they did find lead in them. And like I said, during the summers, it would get so, I guess the air quality, that we just were not allowed to go out. But other than that, I think to me it felt normal because I didn't realize how not normal any of that was until way later.

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KIM: How was your health growing up?

PRIETO: I don't think I realized how bad it was until later because my parents did hide a lot from me. So I didn't realize until years later that at four months I got pneumonia. I didn't realize that I had lead poisoning until years later. I got tested at I think eighteen when they were doing the testing for Liberty Hill and my results came back positive, my mom's like, or I think my dad told us like, "Oh, yeah, you know, you had lead poisoning as a kid," just so casually. And so I wasn't aware of these issues. I was kind of the child that was very disruptive in school even though I wasn't trying to be. I didn't realize that these were also effects—the lack of focus, the hyper activeness, having a very short temper— were all symptoms of lead contamination. I don't think it made sense to me until way later. If I had known a lot sooner, I probably could have dealt with these things or gotten actual help for them. But yeah, it was just kind of things that were normal to me until way later realizing these are not normal symptoms.

KIM: Did you also notice any of your friends or peers having similar issues?

PRIETO: I think that came later on in high school. When I joined cross country, I realized how many of my friends had asthma; an insane amount of students there had asthma. And once again, it wasn't until I left high school and I learned about Exide and all the effects of environmental racism and respiratory issues that I realized it's not a coincidence that all of us growing up in this area have some kind of respiratory issues or why there's so many of my friends that had asthma growing up.

KIM: Yeah, it definitely seems like things weren't really being told to you, you know, it's not like any of the factories or oil refineries or local government would be, like, We're contaminating your air and everything. So this is something that you had to find out on your own over a period of years.

PRIETO: Way later, once it hit the fan for Exide, that's when everything came out. And that's when we started realizing like, Oh, it makes sense why my grandma, she also got pneumonia, why she has respiratory issues. Why so many people have high blood pressure here. It just made sense why the elderly and the youth were doing so bad health wise here.

[00:14:02]

KIM: Yeah. And I know you have this strong background in activism. Did this start in high school or was this a little earlier or a little later?

PRIETO: I think well, growing up my dad, he had a very—in college he wanted to be a Chicano studies professor. So I always had that kind of background, I guess, around my culture. But it wasn't until my sister interned with the BRU, the Bus Riders Union, and it was a rally in the summer right before I started high school. One of the organizers was like, Oh, hey, you're entering high school next year, you should join Roosevelt High School, which was my rival high school's club. And it was where they taught political education. During that time, it was more anti-policing within schools. I think they're trying to get rid of truancy tickets for Black and Brown youth in LAUSD (Los Angeles Unified School District). So I started through those campaigns, but eventually they start introducing clean air and bus demands, less car pollution, and promoting cleaner public transportation and so I think that's where it started developing into environmental racism. And then after I left there, I joined East Yard and just full-blown went into what I'm doing right now with environmental racism activism.

KIM: Fascinating because you're really making that connection with health and race and environment. So how long have you been with them? Oh, sorry. Were you going to say something? How long have you been with East Yard?

PRIETO: I had been attending their events since 2016 maybe, but I didn't really start getting active I think until last year when I did leave my last job. And then I was able to have more time to go to membership meetings and join committees for them.

KIM: What kind of work did you do with them? Or do you do since it's current too?

PRIETO: Yeah. So currently, I think, well, yeah, back then it was just attending meetings, being another community member. And now it's—since I didn't really know what I was getting myself into—but it's what they call a green zone committee. So right now we're working on trying to get this project called the green zone ordinance passed. So specifically, I think for my street, being Pacific and Avocado Heights, where we're trying to get stricter regulations for incoming factories, as well as the ones that are already in place. And so right now we're going through the process of reading the documents, editing the documents, and putting in our comments, as well as reading—right now what I'm doing is reading sections in the environmental impact report and reviewing that just cause it's due this month. So that's something that's still current. But that's what I'm working on right now.

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KIM: And what kinds of things have you done in the past with environmental activism that we didn't talk about? Did we miss anything?

PRIETO: I think it might have been with the Bus Riders Union when I was organizing—one of their campaigns was free public transportation and no cars in LA. And the whole point was to try to minimize CO_2 (carbon dioxide) levels and car congestion within LA. Since the neighborhoods that do receive a lot of the congestion are neighborhoods closest to freeways, just because it's people that aren't from here constantly just exiting and creating that traffic and that's still traffic and raising the levels of CO_2 in our neighborhoods. And so that definitely was —I would use

statistics from that in my organizing, but I think it definitely got a lot stronger when I joined East Yard just because their focus was environmental racism.

KIM: Is your work with East Yard—is that a paid position? Or are you a volunteer?

PRIETO: No, right now I'm a volunteer.

KIM: Okay, awesome. And I know you said something about quitting your last job. Can I hear a little bit about your work history? I mean, you're pretty young, so I don't expect decades of anything.

PRIETO: It was a lot, though. Yeah, it was a lot of work for being super young. Originally when I went in, I was just supposed to be aiding a youth organizer and somehow I got pushed into being the youth organizer and then running an entire youth summer program and being a community organizer, so eventually I got pushed into being just, I guess, doing the general position of a lead organizer. And so I would run the youth club at Roosevelt. So where I started, I ended up being the organizer. We would create workshops for the students, lead the workshops, do outside events where we'd also host workshops to try to recruit students. And during the summer when we couldn't do school organizing, the students would join a youth summer program where we'd basically teach them the fundamentals of organizing, both theory and then actually go out and practice it in the field. So we'd actually go door knocking, phone banking, speaking at forums, panels, and then just preparing for following campaigns, meeting with funders, things like that.

KIM: That is a lot. What did you do before then? You said you were at a different job, right?

PRIETO: Before then I worked—before with the Bus Riders Union, I worked just retail jobs. I think my first job was working in a fast food restaurant in high school. So I guess during the whole time I had those regular jobs, those retail and fast food jobs, I was still just a member with the Bus Riders Union. I would attend events, meetings, also attend their youth programs. And it wasn't until I graduated high school, I went up north for college, and then I decided to come back home and attend college here. That's when they offered me a job. And so that's when I became a full-time organizer with them.

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KIM: Oh, and just to be clear, it's okay if you talked about things that weren't related to environmental justice. I was just curious what your overall work history was. But that's great. You said you went to college up north?

PRIETO: Yeah, Sacramento State (University) my first year. And then I was an ethnic studies major up there, decided it was not exactly the most affordable situation just because the rent was all out of pocket and I didn't get the best housing. And so I think I just realized it would be better if I just came home and worked. I've been doing that since going to Pasadena City College.

KIM: So you were at Sacramento State for one year, and then you came back. Are you still an ethnic studies major?

PRIETO: No, I actually transferred as a geology major. I forgot how that happened. But yeah, it's—I'm still struggling tying both the science along with environmental racism although I know they'll be completely related. Yeah, it's weird balancing science with activism right now. So one is school and one is voluntary right now.

KIM: Okay, that is definitely very interesting. And I think you could make such a strong connection being a geology major. And I think one thing that is kind of funny is that when people think of geologists outside of academia, they tend to think of people who work for Exxon or people who are involved with oil or fracking.

PRIETO: I think—I just come through that there's obviously two sides to everything. Same thing with the major where you can obviously go with two polar opposites where you can either work for the oil refineries or you can work, in some aspect, like for climate change. And so I think what has been interesting to me is specifically fracking in Black communities and how it's affecting them. Environmental racism with them as well.

KIM: Yeah, I think it's great that you're doing geology because you can definitely take that and use it for environmental justice. I mean, I'm sure one thing that you find when you do your work is how people are, I guess, on the one hand, some people don't believe scientists, but on the other hand, you have these companies, say fracking companies or these big corporations, who are like, Well, you know, this, the science behind this is blah, blah, blah, but you can always go, Well, actually, this.

PRIETO: The people that did come were geologists, and they were the ones that did the soil testing and found that it was lead contaminated. So I think even that helped a lot, even way before I knew what geologists were, or what they did. And just even seeing that that was an option. I was like, Okay, yeah, I can. I don't know what I'm going to do yet with this, but I definitely see that there are different routes I can take.

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KIM: Yeah, I'm definitely excited for you to create geologists for environmental justice or something, that'd be so cool. And I read in your pre interview you talked about baby teeth, like a collection of baby teeth from people in your neighborhood and them finding the lead contamination in there? I just thought that was so cool. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

PRIETO: Yeah. So again, when my sister was interning with Liberty Hill, I think one of the things was they were working with a medical center for research. And one of the things that they asked her as their outreach person was, Hey, can you go into your community or the communities directly affected by Exide, specifically children or youth that grew up, were born and raised in those communities, and ask them for baby teeth. Conveniently, my mom, she saves everything so we had a whole bag. And so my sister—because my sister didn't grow up here, I think her first couple years were somewhere else—and so out of, I guess everyone, I was one of the few that was born and raised here and did have baby teeth. And so she collected mine, as well as the project or affordable housing complex down the street on Olympic (Boulevard) and

Soto (Street), she went there and did a lot of baby teeth collection from moms who had their babies' teeth. And they found that there was lead contamination in all of our teeth. All of them that were collected, we all came out positive.

KIM: Has there ever been any attempt to get any restorative justice for things that have happened in your neighborhood?

PRIETO: I think that definitely came in after when they were fighting for the cleanup. So even right now, we're still trying to fight for proper cleanup of the soil. So I think one of the things that Exide – they didn't offer but they had to settle for cleaning up a set amount of homes within a set radius. Basically the homes with the highest lead contamination levels were prioritized. And so they would take whatever soil the person living there wanted extracted and then change it for new soil. But I think right now, we're still struggling with the fact that they're allowed to take ten years to do that. And even then, they're doing the homes out of order, so there's recontamination that's happening with dust and lead in the air settling again and homes next door that just got cleaned. So I think right now that's something that we're struggling with still today with Exide.

KIM: Yeah, it sounds like they're really dragging their feet on this and they're not really trying to come up with a sustainable solution.

PRIETO: Yeah. I think health wise they didn't offer, obviously to help those that are contaminated or anything. It's really just the best that they could do was, Yeah, we'll replace a couple homes' soil and that's about it, but give us ten years to do it. And even then, they're making excuses: Well, we have to talk to our lawyer about set things. And so they're just prolonging the process and making excuses for themselves. And even the radius is ridiculous, because there's still homes outside that are going to be lead contaminated. But just because they don't have enough lead for them they're not going to get cleaned. So it's a whole mess.

KIM: And it seems like they're not offering health care or any community programs or even any financial retribution. It's just, We'll clean up like five houses over a ten year period.

PRIETO: They're like, Sorry, you guys have to deal with the lead contamination or respiratory issues for the rest of your life, but at least you have clean soil.

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KIM: That's absolutely infuriating, especially because it's not clean, you know, over a ten year period. Yeah, that sucks. Have you been involved in that kind of movement to get them to be accountable?

PRIETO: I think right now I'm still learning about it just because I think the heads are the ones that are so involved with it. And even through the committee I'm still learning about it. Like I just learned about how Exide is still making excuses for even the ten-year long gap that they have to clean these houses this recent week. This is information that's still being revealed to me as a community member.

KIM: Oh, and I'm sure it's hard to find that information. I'm sure they make it really hard with the lawyers and whatnot. I'm sure you'd really have to pin them for info. Just to switch gears a little bit, can you tell me—let me just ask generally, how do you consider your health now?

PRIETO: I haven't been able to go to a doctor in a couple of years since Sacramento. So as of right now, I have more concerns than anything, so for sure, I think the first thing I do want to do when I'm able to go to a doctor is get checked or get tests run for adult ADD (attention-deficit disorder). As well as I have noticed that I've developed allergies in the past three years that I honestly didn't have growing up, as well as respiratory issues where it has been more of a struggle. So I've noticed little things here and there that have progressed, but I just haven't had the chance to go or get proper health care right now to go get those things checked out. But I have noticed that certain things have been worsening or progressing.

KIM: What are you allergic to?

PRIETO: So in the spring I never had allergies like other people where my mom has really bad allergies where she just had a lot of sensitivity to pollen and just smells. And I realized how sensitive I'd become to just even the dust in the house, going outside with all my dad's plants. The pollen, and it was so bad this spring. I've never had allergies that bad where I was just constantly sneezing and coughing.

[00:30:27]

KIM: You said you also developed respiratory issues?

PRIETO: Yeah, so that started I want to say in high school. My senior year I had about two breathing attacks—one was a cross country race and the other one was during a run at Griffith Park. I had shortness of breath to the point where I started heaving and I couldn't breathe. I had never had that before, felt like that. And even now, I've noticed it's more of a struggle for me to take deeper breaths. These are definitely issues that I've never had before but they're concerning.

KIM: Does anyone else in your family have—have they gained similar issues as you?

PRIETO: I would say out of everyone my grandma, she's the most sensitive with respiratory issues. She's gotten pneumonia several times now and her health progressed very poorly when she moved here. So yeah, her. She also has high blood pressure and things like that. So I think, yes, slowly people in my family are getting sick from possibly the lead contamination or the environment. My dad, too, he got high blood pressure.

KIM: Have you ever had to ask for accommodations for anything like work or school?

PRIETO: I think just for certain runs, I did have to start running a lot lighter. So I could not go as hard on myself as previously just because I was so scared about those breathing attacks and how sensitive I was becoming to that. I think now just making accommodations with myself with learning how I learn. I do have a very short attention span and just realizing that I have to be a lot more patient with myself. I've just come to realize that I'm also a lot more of a visual learner, so in class I will ask for a more visual representation of lessons just to accommodate how I struggle with my learning.

KIM: Have people been generally accommodating to you or have they disbelieved you?

PRIETO: I think school wise they've been accommodating. Teachers—the professors—have been super helpful in that aspect. My coach was very understanding just because so many students did have asthma. But I think family wise, my dad, he's still kind of in denial where it's like, all my cousins on your side that grew up here also have ADD, same learning issues, but he's still in denial like, Oh, no, you're just a rowdy child. So yeah, definitely denial in the family but outside people have been great.

KIM: I mean, that is something that we tend to see but something that we've kind of found when we're talking to people is a lot of the denial comes from within the family.

PRIETO: Yeah. I don't know why, but my mom—I honestly don't know what she thinks, she's being very quiet. But my dad is the one—he's the one that told me I had lead poisoning, but he's the one that also doesn't believe that it's actually affected me in any way.

KIM: That's interesting.

PRIETO: Or he just denies the whole—I've listed the symptoms to him and he's like, Oh no, those are just common symptoms like everyone has those. Everyone has a short temper, lack of focus. Kids are just rowdy here.

[00:34:18]

KIM: I feel like that's also something that you see with the companies and factories that are poisoning the air. They tend to say things like, "This is not a symptom of pollution, it's just something that happens." Which is unfortunate that there is still a lot of denial from a lot of different angles, not only structurally from, you look at the corporations or the government, but also family members I think sometimes have a hard time coming to terms with it.

PRIETO: Yeah, definitely. I think statistics wise, they'd still deny seeing percentages. They could see how many kids do suffer from asthma or ADD and they'd still deny it. I think it's just their way of coping: "Our neighborhood is not that bad."

KIM: I can imagine it's probably hard as a parent to accept putting your child through something like that, obviously not intentionally, but I think I can—I mean, I don't know what exactly what your parents are thinking but it must be a really hard reality to accept that the environment you're in is poisoning you.

PRIETO: Yeah, I think that's definitely how a lot of people here deal with it, is like they don't deal with it. It's like, if we don't deal with it, or if we don't acknowledge that these issues are here it's not actually happening.

KIM: Yeah, I mean, especially because it's so hard to really do anything about it. Like Exide was just dragging their feet with replacing soil, which seems like it wouldn't take ten years to do. So I can definitely understand where your community and your parents are coming from. But at the same time, I think you're presenting such a good case for yourself too. You're showing statistics, you're talking about your symptoms, you're very involved in the community.

PRIETO: I think it also has a lot to do with like, Oh, well, that's just another added diagnosis that we have to deal with or take medication for and that's just something—a lot of people here also can't afford medication for ADD or getting extra help for those that do need that extra attention or help in school. And so I think in order to prevent that, they'd just rather avoid it altogether.

KIM: And you mentioned that you don't currently have adequate health care to see a doctor. And one thing that we have seen is that even—there are people that are able to see a doctor and they still get turned away and they still, they're put through the wringer of the whole medical care system. So we do see even the people who are lucky enough to see a doctor, they're still not really respected or really believed or they're given a ton of medication and nothing helps.

PRIETO: I know that's definitely one of my dad's worries as well. That's why he doesn't trust doctors, just seeing how medicated my grandma is because she does have so many health issues, and that's why she's scared to go to the doctor as well, because she does know that the next time she does go, she probably is going to get new medication for something else. And so that's something that you do see a pattern with the elderly people and the children here: the doctors constantly prescribing but never providing—I'd say—real help.

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KIM: Yeah, that is something that's come up a lot when we are doing these interviews. It's just something that's—it's just really frustrating, huh? And I'm also kind of curious about your experience right now, given COVID. One thing that we've seen with people that we've talked to lately is COVID is affecting them in several different ways. For some people, it's nice because everyone has to keep their distance and they can finally breathe, but for some people it's caused other stressors, obviously. So I was wondering what your experience has been dealing with COVID?

PRIETO: So me personally, I think I've been fine as well. I've had a much better experience because I've been allowed to stay within my home. And then also my sister she gets to work from home. But I think worry wise, anxiety has raised for my parents knowing that my dad does have high blood pressure, he does directly deal with people at his work constantly. And then knowing how my grandma is very sensitive as well; she has had pneumonia, she does have respiratory issues, and knowing that she does go outside and she does get lonely so she'll try to see her little neighborhood friends and stuff. And so it scares me more for them, for the older folks that do have these health issues in my neighborhood, specifically my family, just because they're the people that are more exposed but also more likely to contract COVID and have a much larger struggle with it.

KIM: And have you noticed a difference in air quality given that you live near these freeways? And then, after COVID really hit, people stopped going to work and everything. Did you notice a difference in air quality?

PRIETO: There might have been just because I did notice there was there was no congestion for the first couple weeks. And so that was really great just because it was—we were allowed to go

outside and be on our street and take up space and not have to worry about all that congestion and just being surrounded by that smog as well as the freeways since we do live directly over an overpass and an underpass. It was really great not having that traffic but right now it's back to normal. It might have been a difference but I didn't really notice just because the refineries as well, like the animal refinery, was still running the same. The other refineries near Farmer John's (meatpacking plant) and all that, they were also running the same. So I think chemical wise from the refineries nearby, I didn't really notice a difference, as well as the trains. Everything was still running.

KIM: So it really didn't do much since there's still all these other polluting factors here. And I love what you just said about taking up space. I think that's so interesting that you said that you're finally allowed to take up space within your own neighborhood.

PRIETO: I think with the congestion and the diesel trucks there's the danger of—we are a small residential street. The speed limit is twenty-five (miles per hour). But traffic does not follow that, and with congestion, it makes it really hard for elderly people and children to be outside and just because of the hazard of getting hit. It seemed safe but now, since it's back to normal.

[00:41:44]

KIM: It's so interesting to hear about your experiences. This is something that I feel is very ingrained in you – having grown up in this environment – this kind of intersection of things like environment and race. And space, community, how it all comes together. It's really interesting to hear that from you. And that was just a point and it wasn't a question or anything. And is there anything that we didn't really talk about in regard to your activism or advocacy? It doesn't have to necessarily be related to environmental illness or environmental justice. Did you do any other forms of advocacy?

PRIETO: I think for now, I feel more of an obligation to be more active within environmental racism. I still have a really strong passion for anti-policing within schools. Just growing up, policing was so bad within my school, but it was also so normalized. It was really frustrating growing up and attending these workshops and understanding—being able to relate policing and the normalization and the effects of it in real time, as opposed to other students that were still going through it and hadn't processed it or didn't have, I guess, that privilege of understanding what policing really looked like, and the effects it had on them. And being a youth, I definitely had a strong passion for anti-policing. Even now, but I think now I feel a little bit more detached just because I'm not the youth anymore. I'm not the one being affected directly by it. So it's a little bit harder for me to connect right now.

KIM: Yeah, of course. What was your experience like, though, in high school? It was high school?

PRIETO: Yeah. So in high school, that's when I was organizing and that's when I started learning more about how policing worked and how bad it was within other schools in the LAUSD. But even then, I'd see where money was being allocated. So we did notice, my first year, for example, I had an English class in a bungalow, but it was a bungalow that was split in

two so basically it was really cramped. So it's like fifty-six of us in a really cramped little bungalow. There weren't enough seats for us in there; the class was mixed with ESL learners, students that were supposed to be in honors, and then the regular students like me that were just supposed to be placed with the regular English class, and how we were cramped in these classes. And we had four teachers that year or four substitutes because they kept getting laid off. And so we didn't have actual curriculum or anything. And they were firing counselors, but then you notice that the number in school police was rising. The money that was being allocated towards school police was rising so they were getting, like new GMC cars, Go Karts for school police on campus that they were allowed to ride on campus, and so I think just being able to connect how there was a lack of money going towards the students and supplies and teachers and going directly towards the policing aspect as well as the random searches that we dealt with. We had the canines that would always come on campus. And it was—we knew legally it was supposed to be a random system. So a computer is supposed to go almost like a raffle and pick a random classroom. And that's how they pick where they're going to go do the random searches. But I think over the years, you realize that certain AP (Advanced Placement) classes were never experiencing these random searches. It was always the regular classes that were getting the majority of the random searches and students getting deliberately pulled out because it was the same students getting picked on constantly.

[00:45:55]

KIM: Yeah. That's terrible. And I think seeing or hearing this story—it's all related in some way. You can't necessarily separate the environmental racism from the over policing, and you see where the funds are allocated. And there's still obviously, both of these stories, they have a very strong racism factor in there too. So it is interesting to hear you talk about this and see these different parts of your life that are really interconnected.

PRIETO: And I think even you see these things growing up, but obviously you don't really know how to say – you don't have a full understanding of them. And it wasn't until later when I was a youth organizer and I was able to look at the statistics and the funding, then I directly was able to connect like okay, there is money being allocated directly to the police and taken away from the actual studies and students and teachers. And then I was doing surveys on other youths' policing experiences and just seeing how bad it is for specifically Black students in LAUSD. Yeah, just hearing how bad it gets in other schools and areas. Yeah, it opened my eyes to a whole new experience that was beyond mine.

KIM: And one thing that I thought was interesting when I talked to someone else from – I forget where she was from exactly, may have been South LA – but she said that she didn't even realize a lot of the—she also kind of grew up around environmental pollution, environmental racism, and lack of funding in schools. I don't think she talked about policing, but then she was saying that when she went to a magnet school somewhere else, which was well funded, at that point then she realized like, "Oh, there is a stark difference in, you know, how funds are allocated. And not only that, but there's also just a difference in air quality." So it was only once she was able to leave to go to that magnet school where she realized the differences in the air quality and the schools.

PRIETO: You definitely see that organizing the charter schools compared to other schools that are in the heart of South LA. You see how schools really are being affected.

KIM: Did you go to a charter school?

PRIETO: No, I went to public school. Garfield High School. Just another public school in East LA. But when I did organize, that's when I was able to – that was actually my first time going to charter schools, was when I was organizing students. I was like, Wow, these are really nice schools. Uniforms, actual supplies in the classrooms. Okay. This is nice.

[00:49:02]

KIM: I think I just have a few more questions, overview questions. And we kind of already talked about this. But if you have anything more to add to this, then please do but if you feel like you talked about it already, then we can skip over this. But do you think race or gender identity has impacted your experience with environmental illness in any way?

PRIETO: Race, absolutely, just because my neighborhood is a predominantly Brown immigrant community. And so these are people who obviously came here having no choice but to pick the most affordable homes that just so happened to be placed here. Or the 710. Because these homes were here already. It was the 710 and these refineries that moved into our neighborhood. And so I think—I don't remember the exact decade but I remember when it did start becoming more Latino that's when the 710 expansion started coming, displacement of homes started happening. So I think it absolutely has everything to do with why these refineries, freeways, diesel trucks and train tracks are allowed to be here.

KIM: How about gender identity?

PRIETO: I feel like it does have a role. I feel like in my own house it has more of a role. I think definitely when it comes to my dad being the head figure, the one being able to deny my health issues whereas him, he's the one that does get the medication, he does get the help, we have the concern for him. When it comes to my dad, it's instantly like, Oh, something's wrong with him. But when it comes to me or my grandma's it's like, "Maybe you guys should just wait it out. Drink some tea, drink some natural remedies. Maybe you guys just need to go out a little bit more because you're not being active enough, or you're not hydrating or you're not eating what you should be." Whereas the men in the family, they are believed a little bit more instantly compared to us.

KIM: That's a really interesting perspective. I haven't really heard about it in terms of within a family, so I never really thought about that as the head of the household making the decisions on who is sick and who's not sick. The last question I have for you is, how do you think society will view environmental illnesses or sensitivities in ten years?

PRIETO: In ten years I think the issues are still going to be very prevalent. For example, even the green zone ordinance, the counties allowing the refineries here, three to ten years just to even update the regulations. So regardless, in these ten years, if anything, I think it's going to be progressing because we currently still are fighting 710 expansion. So these issues currently aren't

getting better, they're getting worse. And I just hope that in ten years, with organizations like East Yard, it is going to be a lot more of an issue. And there won't be denial within elderly folks and for youth that are entering school and being affected by the lack of focus or short tempers, things that they can't help. I hope that the stigma definitely with those health issues and getting help does come to an end. I definitely do think that it will be just with the generation of people who are raising kids next, I definitely see them taking it more seriously, especially as the elderly folks in ten years are going to be people like my parents. And so I see it being taken more seriously; however, with the actual corporations, I do see them still getting away with the environmental racism and the pollution that they're inhibiting on us.

[00:53:30]

KIM: Do you plan to keep working with East Yard in the near future on these issues?

PRIETO: I think definitely, as someone who I think just realized how bad my own health issues really were, and how badly I actually have been affected by the pollution from environmental racism, I do feel my obligation now just to completely advocate for it and make it aware and for the other elderly folks and community members in general. So yeah, I definitely do see myself doing more environmental racism work. Especially with hopefully my degree soon I do see myself getting more involved. Also I guess as a geologist hopefully. Yeah, seeing how those two tie in, but I definitely see myself working with environmental racism later on.

KIM: Yeah. Do you have any specific plans?

PRIETO: Not yet, but I think I have been applying for—also programs and workshops that deal with environmental racism, and just activism in nature. So it's specifically Black and Brown people going out in nature and learning through workshops about the ties between environmental racism and our inaccessibility to nature. And so that's something I have yet to learn but that I'm looking forward to because I am really looking forward to applying to more of those programs later on.

KIM: That's incredible. I feel like environmental justice—I feel like for a while it was perceived as a very white middle class issue, like don't forget to recycle, get a hybrid instead of driving your car. And I just love the perspective that you're bringing. I honestly don't really know what the national general trends are with environmental justice. So I can't really say for certain, but I'm really glad that you're bringing environmental racism into the picture and I feel like that tends to be ignored in the general public, just like the actual racism issue. And, it just tends to be about things like, conservation, recycling and stuff. So I'm really glad that you're bringing that issue. And I think you're doing such an amazing job.

PRIETO: Thank you. Yeah, even when I went to the Climate Change March here in LA just seeing how predominantly white that movement was and how ignored the issues of environmental racism on the local level really is. But it's also because those people aren't affected the way we are in low income communities where we're literally being placed at the heart of the pollution and people being affected by them, getting away with these false permits or just illegally disposing of these chemicals in our neighborhood, directly in our water sources, in

our air, in our sewage. It's something that I don't expect them to understand. But I think just seeing how predominately white that whole movement is, is definitely a drive for me and other people working within environmental justice in our neighborhoods.

[00:57:12]

KIM: Yeah. And I mean, I think one of the issues with like, Al Gore's documentary (*An Inconvenient Truth*) was just it came from a very white middle class perspective of very much like individual choices changing any environment. And you're dealing so much with things that aren't your individual choice and things that you can't help and things that are put upon you because of environmental racism. So I think you bring a really great perspective to that. Do you have anything you'd like to add to the interview that we didn't get to talk about?

PRIETO: I can't think of anything.

KIM: Do you have any questions for me?

PRIETO: Just how I would be kept up to date with this. Just excited to see other people's stories.

KIM: Oh, awesome. Okay, so we are trying to finish up, you know, the whole interview process. We're trying to finish and put everything in the UCLA archive hopefully by the end of this summer. So what we're working on is transcribing the interviews. And then once it's transcribed, we'll show it to you. There's a chance that some interviews might just go in as audio only if we run out of time. But even so, we'll let you know what's going on. We'll definitely be emailing or calling people once their interviews are in the archive so you can take a look at it. But in the meantime, I'll send you the legal agreement so you could take a look and let me know if there's anything you'd like to change. And then once you sign off on that, you're giving us a copyright to put the transcript and the audio in the archive. Does that make sense?

PRIETO: Yeah. Okay.

KIM: Do you mind if I turn off the recording?

PRIETO: That's fine.

KIM: Thanks. Just a second.

[00:50:13] (End of August 8, 2020 interview)