Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Melba Vasquez

Interviewed by Cynthia de las Fuentes and Alexandra Rutherford
Los Angeles, CA
January 27, 2005

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MV –Melba Vasquez, interview participant
CF –Cynthia de las Fuentes, interviewer
AR – Alexandra Rutherford, interviewer

CF – Well, you know, Melba, in the past you've talked about unearned advantages and unearned disadvantages from your past. You talked about the unearned advantages that you had from growing up in a small college town in Texas, in a loving family that cherished you, and also about unearned disadvantages. Can you talk a little bit more about how those experiences growing up led to your passions in your work in psychology?

MV – Sure. When I talk about unearned advantages, you're right; I'm talking about growing up as the first born of seven children in a traditional Latino family. I had the advantage of [an] incredible extended family. [I had] several aunts and uncles, and grandparents. Both my parents were first born in their large families. So I had innumerable people in my life who were fairly unconditional. I was a cherished child, as were all the children in our family, and so that was a huge advantage. The thing I talk about that I think we each need is the experience of people's faces lighting up when we enter a room, and I'm aware that I had that most of the time (certainly not all the time, but most of the time). So I think that that's an incredibly positive foundation and a tremendous advantage for anyone, and it certainly has been for me.

There are many, many other unearned advantages, but [I'll] switch to the unearned disadvantages. [They] have to do with growing up and moving into a semi-segregated public school in which all teachers and administrators were white. Latinos were discriminated against pretty significantly. We were punished for speaking Spanish; we were punished for being there. The African-American population had not yet entered the school system. We had a separated black school. So that was a very painful experience, to enter that school system, and all of a sudden be treated as a second-class citizen. I didn't have the words to articulate the experience at the time, but I went from being a cheerful little girl to being very sad and probably went into a depression, in retrospect, for a period of time when I first entered school. I cried all the time. My mother didn't know what was wrong; she didn't understand it. So in retrospect, that was a very interesting experience.

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And then, throughout the public school experience, I had the experience of going from public school in the third grade, into Catholic school in the fourth grade. [So] first

through third [grade, I was in public school], and then fourth grade through seventh grade in Catholic school, and that immersed me back into the culture because the majority of people who went to Catholic school in my hometown in Central Texas were Mexican-American. And the nuns were from Mexico, for the most part, and so that was another grounding experience and provided me with a good, solid set of educational skills. The whole time, I was rewarded for being a good student, and so that was, sort of, another advantage. Perhaps [it was] and earned advantage because I did work hard. My mother and my father were both very strong proponents of education and made sure that we read and did our homework and so on.

One of the reasons I enjoy talking about that is that I think that we all have a set of both earned advantages that contribute to our resiliencies and allow us to get through, survive and thrive in a number of different ways, as well as face obstacles by virtue of our gender and our ethnicity and race, and so on.

CF – Have these experiences influenced your career passions?

MV – Yes. Thank you.

CF – How?

MV – Yes, I have no doubt. My undergraduate degrees were in English and political science. I majored in English because the very first course I took during the summer after my high school graduation was an English composition class. The professor gave me an A and told me that it was only one of about four A's she had given in ten years, or something like that. So I though, oh my God, I had no idea that I was capable of something like that, and so I pursued a major in English because I thought that was what I was good at. I did not know that I had the opportunity to probably major in a number of different things.

So I taught. I got a teaching certification, but I became interested in understanding human behaviour in regard to discrimination and prejudice because it had been such a painful part of my life, and the lives of people who I cared about. So I started to do extra work in the area of ethnic minority psychology. I started working on a masters in counseling and I had a mentor, Dr. Colleen Connolly at Texas State University, who encouraged me to apply for the doctoral program. I did not know what counseling psychology was at the time, but she reassured me. [She gave me] the context of her explanations, which didn't make a whole lot of sense to me at the time, but she assured me that it would be a good fit. She was absolutely right because it allowed me to further explore, and gave me the tools, the skills, the intellectual capacity to understand and explore further the dynamics of prejudice and discrimination, as well as resilience and survivorship.

CF – And so, your dissertation was on Chicanas in higher education, right?

{6:31}

MV – Yes. I looked at factors related to successful achievement.

CF – And what kind of support did you have for that kind of a dissertation, in a traditional, large institution like UT Austin?

MV – Like UT Austin. You know, there were no Latino psychologists on the campus at the time, neither in the educational psychology nor in the psychology department, but I did have some white mentors who were very supportive and willing to help me seek sources and resources. My co-chairs were Gary Hanson and Earl Koile, and I had a variety of people like [inaudible] and Lucia Gilbert, [and] Ira Iscoe, who were either on my committee, or were resources. So I did have support from white professors, who were allies.

CF – You mention that there weren't any other Chicano or Latino psychologists on campus. Where did you find a community that could support you as a Chicana psychologist?

MV – Well, by learning to go to conferences. I had a peer by the name of Anna Gonzalez, who is now Anna Gonzalez-Sorensen, and she and I were in graduate school at the same time. [We were] the first Latinos admitted into that particular program.

CF – You were the first ones?

MV – Yes.

CF – That's why you talk about being a guinea pig.

MV – Yes, yes. We were the first. We were told we were guinea pigs, because even though our grades and GRE (graduate record exam) scores were reasonable, they were not at the usual level of students admitted into the UT Austin program, and so we were guinea pigs. I think that was their non-politically correct way of trying to engage in affirmative action. That's what they were trying to do.

CF – So your first conference…?

MV – Yes. What happened was that Ira Iscoe, [a] community psychologist who was on campus and [was] director of the counseling center at the time, brought Dr. Amaro Padilla to give talks at UT Austin. And he was the very first Latino psychologist who Anna and I met. While he was there, he met us and said to Ira, "These young graduate students need to go to this symposium about Chicano psychology being held in California in a couple of months." And so Ira found funding and got us there, and that is where she and I also met the first Latina psychologist ever, Martha Bernal. She was the first Latina psychologist that we'd met. So that's where we met Martha Bernal as well.

{9:24}

CF – Tell us the story. I love that story.

MV – (Laughs) Martha gave her talk, and afterwards, there were a lot of people standing around her, as often people do after someone gives a talk, and Anna and I were these shy, young, second year, I believe, graduate students standing off in a corner, watching her in awe. We dared each other to go up and, not only introduce ourselves, but touch her. We wanted to touch her to make sure she was alive and real. And so we did. We went up and introduced ourselves. She was very gracious and welcoming, of course. We touched her and didn't want to wash our hands for a while. She laughed her head off years later when we told her that story.

CF – That's a great story. I like also hearing about how she mentored you into your own first professional presentations, as well.

MV – Oh yes. Soon after that, Anna and I decided to ask her to chair a symposium at the American Psychological Association convention. We had invited a few other people, who were students also. She did. Martha agreed to do it. She gave us a deadline by which we had to have the papers to her and insisted that we meet the deadline. Then she had us meet the day before our presentation in her hotel room to practice giving our presentations. She had, of course, edited our papers ahead of time and then she made us practice a couple of times each, telling us to slow down here, or clarify that, or whatever. She put a lot of time and effort into mentoring us, and shaping our skills in presenting. She was wonderful.

CF – What a great experience. [Let's talk about] Chicano psychology. I wasn't around when Chicano psychology was around. I think I went to a Chicano psychology conference in East Lansing, Michigan, that Roberto Velasquez and some of his colleagues put on up there, but I heard that that was not the first conference. Tell me about your understanding of Chicano psychology in terms of an organization [and] in terms of its movement.

MV – Yes, you know, I can't remember who the primary movers were of the very first Chicano psychology conference. I suspect that it was Dr. Amaro Padilla and Dr. Rene Ruiz, who died several years ago. People like Manuel Ramirez, Prof. Al Casteneda.

CF – Al Casteneda.

MV – Yes, Al Casteneda presented, as did Martha Bernal. There were a couple of other women, who I'm not remembering right now. But it was a symposium. There were about ten or twelve people who gave papers on their research. It was just an awesome experience. I believe it was the first symposium on Chicano psychology.

{12:27}

CF – That's '76, right?

MV – That was in ’76, I believe. Yes, ’76. I think there was another one, and then there was a conference at Lake Arrowhead, about 1979 or 1980. Another symposium was held. It was actually called the Lake Arrowhead Conference, and what came out of that was the establishment of the National Hispanic Psychological Association, which is now called the National Latino Psychological Association. That, I believe, just celebrated its 25th anniversary this year.

CF – Thank you. Can you tell me a bit about how you became involved as an active member of APA, how you became involved in governance, and why?

MV – Both Anna Gonzalez-Sorensen and I were both selected at the end of our first year in graduate school as minority fellowship honourees. We were in the very, very first cohort of the APA minority fellowship program. We were the first students selected. We were among the first students selected. Early on, Dr. Dalmas Taylor was the original executive director (James Jones is now), and they basically did many things to mentor the first few [cohorts]. Well, they still do. Some of the things they did was urge us to come to the American Psychological Association convention, urged us to present, urged us to be involved. There were summer internships, and I did one in Washington, D.C. with a political internship, with the office of Henry B. Gonzalez from San Antonio. [So I] spent a summer in Washington, D. C. doing that. As part of that summer internship, we went to the APA building, which was over on 17th Street at the time, several times to have meetings and so on, and to meet people. Dalmas Taylor and then James Jones were very proactive in having us come to conventions, to attend [meetings], told us how to attend meetings, what divisions to attend relative to our specialties and so on. They actively mentored us and socialized us into the professional activities like that.

I think that I have a natural political background because my parents were pretty active politically, at the grassroots level. My mother, for example, was the first Latina to be on the school board in San Marcos, which is my hometown. They were always very active in voter registration and so on. As a child, I used to go registering people to vote. Even when there was still a poll tax, we used to figure out how to raise money and get people to register to vote when it used to cost money still. I think that oriented me to see politics in the professional arena as a natural thing to do. I think being a first-born, you have a tendency to automatically slip into taking responsibility (laughs).

I think I was invited to run for BSERP, the Board for Social and Ethical Responsibility in Psychology, which was then considered the social conscience of the profession. That is the board that was later merged with the Board of Ethnic Minority Affairs to become the APPI, the Board for the Advancement of Psychology in the Public Interest. So I was on BSERP, and it was one of the most awesome experiences of my life. I served with Bob Guthrie and Leona Tyler and Chuck Kiesler, and a number of different people, [including] Steve Morin. [There were] just a number of different people. I was in awe of these people and saw, and learned a lot about how there was a place for psychology [and] members of the association to move psychology in the direction of one of its missions,

and that is to promote human dignity and social welfare, the welfare of people [and society].

{17:03}

So, I got the bug and I just continued to be involved in a number of different ways and found out that even though being involved is sometimes painful and discouraging, sometimes one person can make a difference just [by] being at the table. I also found out that people can learn and be responsive. I certainly have learned an incredible amount. I'm still learning. We all learn on an ongoing basis. So, it's just been largely an empowering experience.

CF – How have you seen psychology, since you've become involved, change over time to be more inclusive, more welcoming or more affirming of you as a woman of colour?

MV – I think both psychology, as a profession, and the association, the APA, have evolved significantly in the last three decades. I think that it still has a long way to go, but I think we are having, at various levels of the governance structure, discussions that we would not have had even ten years ago. [We're having] discussions about mainstreaming diversity, and having diversity training for the council of representatives, and for boards and committees on a semi-regular basis. We're doing things that would not have been thought of ten years ago. There are a number of different things that have changed. Again, there's still a lot of room for change, but I have seen a significant amount of change.

CF – What do you see as the future for Latino psychology?

MV – Oh, goodness. I think that Latino psychology will continue to evolve and grow. I have no doubt. Latinos in this country are now the largest ethnic minority group [and] we will only continue to grow by virtue of both immigration and our birth rates. We will permeate every aspect of society. There's a huge gap between our representation in society and in the profession, and we have more doctors and lawyers who are Latino than we do psychologists. That's a challenge. I think a lot of our talented people go into those other professions and don't see psychology as a viable profession. So we have to work at many, many different levels, including the public school level, to encourage people to consider the invaluable social science of psychology. So we have to increase the pipeline in order to be able to provide services, to do the research, to do the teaching and training, to provide the organizational consultation, that I think we need in order to be able to be responsive to the needs of society for Latinos. I hope that our population of Latino psychologists increases significantly in the future. Many of us are working very hard to try and make that happen.

CF – Is psychology up for the challenge of addressing the needs of Latinos in the United States?

{20:46}

MV – No. Not yet. We're trying very hard to get there. One of the ways that we're trying to get there is by training our white counterparts to provide those services, because there's no way that psychologists of colour can do that. So, our white counterparts have to have the skills and have to learn to provide appropriate services as well as the research and training for the populations.

CF – What advice would you have for a Latina who is interested in entering into the field, who may be an undergraduate psychology major? What advice would you have for her?

MV - Well, I would say several things. First of all, I would say [to] be sure that you're following your bliss, because people who major in fields that they love and enjoy (for the most part, [because] there's drudgery in every field) are going to do well. People who learn to work in areas where the work feels more or less natural are going to do very well. I would encourage people to find their fit, and make sure that psychology is their fit. Now, [an] undergraduate in psychology is very difficult. It's a challenge. It doesn't always feel natural, but if they can stick to it and get into graduate school, they can do that.

One of the things that I always like to say to women [and] to women of colour in particular, in any field, and that would include psychology, is to learn how to, number one, use their resourcefulness to seek help [and] to seek support. It's very difficult to do it alone. Learning how to develop support groups is very important. And another thing that's more an individual thing, is the importance of how to live with mistakes. A lot of people tend to make mistakes and, I think women of colour in particular tend to allow those to define themselves. I see that over and over again, that people allow mistakes to define who they are. I encourage people to learn that mistakes are simply a natural part of life and that they should allow themselves to believe, unambivalently, in their own competencies and to surround themselves with people who believe in them, also. So that's some pieces of advice that I would give to young people.

CF – That's great. Tomorrow I'm going to be interviewing Oliva Espin. What would you want to know?

MV – About Oliva? Oh my goodness. I would like to hear her talk (because I think that we have so few role models) of her experience of the inner sections, about her being a woman, of being a Cuban-American, and of being an openly identified lesbian. I would love to hear her talk about that. She's such a powerful woman and she is her own person and has always been. I'd like to hear her talk about those.

CF – Can you describe for us you're professional career, maybe choice points that you made from graduate school to where you are now and the development of your professional career, and help us understand a bit about why you chose what you chose?

{24:31}

MV – Yes, sure. I did a two-year half-time internship at the University of Texas counseling centre. I love counseling centre work, and one of the things I loved about it was the diversity that it allowed. We could do psychotherapy with students, we could provide program development, we could do consultation with faculty and student organizations, we could teach, there were a number of different things that we could do back then. I'm from a program that really encouraged us to go into academia and frankly, I felt intimidated by that. I felt that research was not my strongest suit. I really could not see myself being an academic in the way that I saw my professors being academics. Yet, there was a strong value about academia. So my compromise was to be a counseling centre psychologist.

In fact, my very first job was at Colorado State University. Jim Hurst used to be at Colorado State University and he was Dean of Students at the time that I did my internship. So he encouraged me to apply to Colorado State. It was one of the first counseling centres in the country to be APA accredited. So I interviewed. I remember it was February. It was snowing, and I couldn't believe it was snowing when I interviewed. Donna McKinley was the director of the counseling centre then, and I fell in love with her immediately as a potential boss, and so I accepted the job and went. Also, and this was the other nice compromise, I was also offered an assistant professorship in the counseling psychology program department and so I also got to work with Dick Suinn, who was chair of the department at the time. I was there for two years, and then became training director of the APA accredited internship program, and did that for two years.

Then my partner, Jim Miller, had a job offer back in Texas to be a school principal. Education was his career, and he'd given up a great consulting job in Texas to go with me to Colorado, and so it was sort of his turn. So we moved back to Texas and that was, sort of, a personal decision because I hated to leave Colorado. But we moved back to Texas and I was offered a job at University of Texas at Austin back at the counseling centre under a new director, Dave Drum. I proceeded to work there for nine years. I was also training director there for a while. I also taught courses, both at Colorado State, as well as the University of Texas.

I started to realize that I was coming to a point developmentally where I needed to either become director of a counseling centre, or do something else. I started to look around for directorships. There were none available in Texas at the time. And unfortunately [at] about that time, my father died. He had a major brainstem stroke and it was a very difficult six months, and then he died. So it was not a good time for me to leave the state. My family is in central Texas. It was a very personal decision, once again, not to leave at that time. I had always had a part time private practice, so what I decided to do was go into full time practice for a while, and then when the time was right, I would go apply for a directorship sometime [and] somewhere.

What happened was that I fell in love with practice. I just loved independent practice. I had always loved university work. I had always seen myself as a team player. I had taught school for a couple of years, [it was] public school before that. I had never worked independently, and I was amazed at the burden that was lifted. I had not realized what a

burden it was, [or] how much energy it took to work within a system. And I'm a pretty good systems person (laughs). I was just flabbergasted at that insight. I also discovered that I could continue to write and publish, and I could continue to be actively involved in various associations, professional associations. I still, frankly, doubled and tripled my income, even while doing all that. So, let's see, almost 14 years after leaving the counseling centre, I'm still in full time private practice and I'm still loving it, and I'm still enjoying everything else I do.

{29:35}

CF – I guess it was back in the '80s [when] I saw you do a talk at UT to Latina undergraduate students, and I was there. I wasn't an undergraduate at the time. I was a graduate student because at that time I had met you and I was following you everywhere I could afford to follow you (laughs). Yeah, touching you so you wouldn't disappear. I remember one of the titles of your talks was "You can have it all, but you can't do it all at the same time," or something like that.

MV – You can have it all, but you can't do it all at the same time?

CF – Yeah. Do you remember that?

MV – No, but it sounds like a good talk (laughs).

CF – That was the time when you were on a panel with Lena Guerrero, and it was done at the Thompson Center.

MV – Oh, I do remember that.

CF – It was in the mid '80s maybe, the early '80s, somewhere around there?

MV – Yes, it was a symposium, a women's symposium. Yes, I do remember that.

CF – [It was] for Latinas.

MV – Was it just for Latinas? I thought it was for all women. Because we had Libby Linebarger speak also.

CF – That's right! That's right.

MV – Yes, it was a women's symposium.

CF – It felt very Latina there.

MV – That's very good.

{30:44}

CF – So tell me, it seems as though you do it all and you have it all in many ways. Tell us how you negotiate [all that]. You talk about how, in your personal life, you've had to make some choice points, you know, decisions for your family, for your partner, and yet it seems as though you've flourished every time you've made these decisions. How do you negotiate it? I mean, for Hispanic women who value family and sometimes family doesn't value the career as much as their mentors or peers would have them value it. How do you balance all of that?

MV – I think it is a challenge for any human being, for sure. But that is a good question, because I think that it's important to say that I made a choice early in life not to have children, for example. I made myself reconsider that choice in my mid thirties, but I have a step daughter, I have at this point 14 nieces and nephews on my side, and then some on Jim's side, I have a very supportive partner who is very wonderful at making sure…we both believe in supporting each other's dreams. So, even though what one chooses often annoys the other, we still try to work hard to support each other. He's not happy at how much I travel, for example, but we work on that.

I think that, as implied by the title of that talk you were talking about, I think we all have to develop a skill in prioritizing and balancing. I'm not always happy with the pace at which I get things done. Sometimes I'm late with certain projects, but overall, I make sure that I say yes to things that I love and feel passionate about, and that I say no to things that I don't really need to be doing. One of the seductions is that there are so few of us, still, that as people get more and more sensitive to the importance of having diverse representation, we get pulled upon and called upon to do a number of different things. The temptation is there to reinforce it by either doing it or finding other people to do it for them. There are a number of different pulls like that, that are very seductive, but I think as I've grown older and wiser, I've been careful to choose things that, (and everything takes energy and everything takes time) but to make sure that whatever I choose to do [or] to say yes to are things that I feel passionate about, that feel important, that I love doing. That has made it a lot easier to make those choices.

But you're right. There are a number of different choices that we all have to make. I do have a large extended family that I really like spending time with. My partner Jim and I have great fun together, and so when I'm gone, we talk at least twice a day because we just cherish each other and like to share what's going on. It's always a pull not to be spending time with him. As I say, I just love life and I'm optimistic about what happens. And I get a lot back. Being at this conference and seeing people and getting ten hugs an hour is just wonderful (laughs).

CF – In a way it's taken on a life of its own. You were one of the founders of this conference.

MV – That's correct.

CF – So now you can just sit back and enjoy.

{34:44}

MV – Absolutely. Yes. This conference, the National Multicultural Conference and Summit, was a presidential project that I and two other presidents, Derald Wing Sue for Division 45, and Rosie Bingham for Division 17 (and Lisa Porche-Burke was also with Division 45 with Derald Wing Sue) that we did when I was president of Division 35 (Society for the Psychology of Women). We didn't know that it was going to evolve into an every two-year event, but it has and it's been wonderful. I am enjoying just being here and not having to be one of the organizers.

CF – What was the genesis of the Multicultural Conference and Summit? How did it get started and why?

MV – Division 35 had a history of having its mid-year winter meeting (the boards of all divisions meet at mid winter) and Division 35 had a norm of having a conference in it's city, wherever it held it's mid-year winter meeting. I proposed to Derald and Rosie that we join, because it was the first time that there was a cadre of ethnic minority presidents of divisions, that we join to have a conference together at our mid-year winter meetings. We decided to do that the August after we were elected presidents, and then in January at the division leadership conference, the Committee on Division/APA Relations, encouraged division presidents elect to work together on projects, and so many other divisions decided to co-sponsor. One of the things that we really wanted to do with our presidential years was to start working on the importance of mainstreaming multiculturalism in psychology. We felt that it was time to push that agenda a bit more forward through the divisional structures. That was a lot of the genesis; those were some of the goals and motivations. As we worked together, the energy and the excitement was just amazing.

We decided to have it on the west coast because we didn't want to compete with the round table held at Columbia University every year.

CF – Robert Carter's.

MV – [It was] Robert Carter's at the time. So we had it a month earlier, on the west coast. That's been, sort of, why we continue to have it on the west coast, so that we don't compete with the east coast conference, a month later. So we had it, and it just became much larger than we ever expected. It was very exciting, so we decided to do it again two years later and we added division 44, in the form of Steve James [with] the Society for the Study of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues. We had another great time doing that, again. I believe that it's the first major conference, that is member driven, to have become established like it has. It's been very exciting.

CF – So, one of the original goals was to mainstream diversity. How has it done that? What grade would you give it, now in its fourth generation?

MV – I would give it at least a B+ or an A-.

{38:37}

CF – Really?

MV – Well, because I think one of the reasons it has been successful is that it does draw a number of psychologists, both of colour, as well as white psychologists, who are hungry for the information. We had over 500 participants the first time. We got a bigger venue the next time. We had to close it down at 800. I think that's why they went to this venue, which allows for a thousand attendees. The other thing that has worked well is that we structure it around the mid-year winter meetings of many divisions, and so many of the leaders of the association attend. So, the message is being driven to those key people who are leaders in the association. That's been part of the strategy and goal.

CF – Of course you know this, but you are also president elect of the Texas Psychological Association. Can you talk a little bit about your involvement in TPA and how you got to be where you are and what your themes are, or what your agenda [is]?

MV – Yes. I have been a member of Texas Psychological Association for many years (over 20 years), and have served in a number of different capacities. [I've served in] everything from program chair, to chair of the ethnic minority committee, to serving on the board. [I] was asked at various times to run for president, and just never really could prioritize it until I finally decided to do it. I am the first person of colour president of the Texas Psychological Association, which is a shame because Texas has a huge Hispanic population. It should have happened before, but this is where we are. I'm very excited about the opportunity to try, in that organization, to increase the diversity of its membership, in its leadership, as well as the content of programs and so on. [I] try to make that part of my initiative. I'm excited about that. I'll be president in 2006 and Norm Anderson has already agreed to be an invited keynote speaker in November of 2006. I'm excited about that. I know it's a year and ten months from now, but we have to get him on the list early.

CF – I know that Star Vega was president of the California Psychological Association and you now are president elect of TPA. Do you know of any other Latinos who have been president of their state associations?

MV – You know, there is, I'm trying to remember…California has a new president elect, who is also Latino. I'm afraid I'm not going to come up with his name right this minute. We'll have to insert it. Lechuga? Is that his name? David Lechuga? I think. It might be David Lechuga. I think that's his name. I'm trying to think if there was an east coast Latina, maybe, who may be president, but I'm not sure about that. But no, Star was our pioneer. She was the first Latina. There are several African Americans, I think, who have been presidents of their state psychological association.

CF – Including BraVada [Garrett-Akinsanya] now, she's president elect. I mentioned Star Vega. Tell me a bit about your experience with her, your collaborations with her, your friendship with her.

{42:25}

MV – I met Star Vega a little later than I've known most people. I met her, I believe, when she was president elect of California Psych Association. She had boundless energy, and she was an authentic human person, and it was very, very sad when we found out that she had leukemia. I remember she had such a sense of humour. Many of us were at consolidated board and committee meetings, and she allowed us to take her hat shopping because she had lost all her hair just recently from her chemo treatments. We had so much fun that day, trying on hats and laughing. I'll never forget that day.

More importantly, [I remember] her contributions. She influenced our current APA president, Ron Levant, to have enhancing diversity as one of his initiatives, and gave him several ideas that he is still articulating and using. So her influence continues.

CF – One way that I was thinking about how the impact of the National Multicultural Conference and Summit has had on APA in general, is that every president since then has had diversity as one of their initiatives, hasn't it?

MV – I hope you're right. I think that's wonderful.

CF – I think that might be true.

MV – I think that might be, at least in part.

CF – At least in part. I was also remembering when you were talking about Star, my first introduction to Star was at the first Latino psychology conference in San Antonio in 2000. She introduced me to martinis (laughs). Do you remember? [It was] you, me, Star and Martha, sitting and having a martini.

MV – I do remember that. Yes. I believe we all got introduced to martinis that evening.

CF – I think we did. But Martha was sick during that time.

MV – She was, and we didn't know it at the time.

CF – She had had her surgery and was still struggling, but she put us to shame on the dance floor, didn't she?

MV – She did.

CF – She closed the night. She was dancing all night long, until the band went home.

MV – It was lovely. You hosted that conference, and you honoured her with a special lifetime achievement award. She was so happy. That was a wonderful gift to her.

{45:07}

CF – We have some special pictures from that too. [We have] some special moments and special pictures where, I think, there are four Latinas who have mentored Latinas. She mentored you, and you [mentored] me, and me, one of my students.

MV – That's right. Four generations.

CF – Four generations of Latinas mentoring Latinas. One of the things that I found particularly touching is your tribute to her. Your keynote was a tribute to Martha. Could you recall some of the things that you wrote about her?

MV – Yes. I decided to do that, and actually, I took that tribute and had it published in American Psychologist as part of another keynote that I gave. It's there for prosperity. At the first National Multicultural Conference and Summit, we honoured four women of colour, and Martha Bernal was one of them. Carolyn Payton, [and] Reiko True were also honoured, as was a Native American woman, posthumously. I'll remember her name in just a minute.

CF - Carolyn Attneave.

MV – Carolyn Attneave, thank you. It was a wonderful, wonderful, powerful talk, as all three of those women (and Teresa LaFromboise gave a talk for Carolyn Attneave), talk about their personal experiences and their development as women of colour psychologists, both their challenges and obstacles, as well as their successes. It was very inspiring and very powerful.

Martha Bernal grew up, professionally, at a time when ethnic minority psychology had not come into its own at all and [she] was socialized in her training to do all kinds of other research. So she did child development research and so on, and then started looking around and seeing that there were differences in child development issues, and started looking into the lack of ethnic minority psychologists in the profession and started doing work in that area. [She] talked about her professional transformation in moving from mainstream psychology into ethnic minority psychology research. She's a great role model for us in terms of being willing to be on the cutting edge and speak about the concerns that no one else was speaking of at the time. She was often the only woman of colour in various settings that she found herself [in]. [She] was willing to be an articulate spokesperson to challenge, often. I think pioneers often have to have those little rough edges to push the envelope, and she could do that. She could push the envelope. But she could also be the kindest, most tender person in the world.

{48:25}

CF – [I have] a special memory of us when we were in San Francisco, and she was going to be receiving an award, and that night that she flew in, she was very sick and we ended up spending quite a few hours with her in the ER in San Francisco. She wanted to hear all of the things we were going to say about her (laughs). So we had to tell her. It reminded me a little bit about how you had to read your report to her before you presented it. She says, "Ok, tell me what you're going to say about me, and tell me what you said about me." It was special.

MV – We ended up having a mini award ceremony for her in the emergency room. She was on oxygen and she didn't get to go to the ceremony that afternoon at APA, the general awards ceremony, so we had our own mini award ceremony.

CF – Maria had said some things. She actually delivered the talk.

MV – Maria Root was going to make the comments, yes.

CF – There were certain things in there that I remember that Martha had said, "make sure and say it with this tone," and Maria wasn't sure if she could do it. She said, "You have to kick some…!" (laughs).

MV – Yes, I think Martha Bernal wanted Maria Root to be a bit more challenging than was Maria's style. Yes, that's right. That was Martha.

CF – That was Martha.

MV – I also remember the memorial for Martha Bernal that was held in Arizona several months after she died. You and I went, along with Patricia Arredondo and, let's see, who were some of the others who were there? I'm trying to remember.

CF – Was Maria there? Maria Root?

MV – Was Maria Root there? I think she didn't make it. I'm trying to remember.

CF – I know George Knight was there, of course. And quite a few other people were there.

MV – Quite a few other people were there, and it was a wonderful tribute to her. It was a wonderful tribute. There were many of her colleagues, many students, as well as her family.

CF – Connie Chan was there. We met some of her [Martha's] family, and they looked so much like her (gasps), and her partner, Betty, and Linda Garnets.

MV – Linda Garnets was there too, yes, thank you. We miss Martha.

{50:49}

CF – It's so important to keep her memory alive. Every time I teach a psychology course, I make sure my students read as much as they can of her. Every time I do a case study presentation, I always use the posthumous name Martha. Or, as the alias instead of a real client's name, I'll use the name Martha, just to keep her memory alive for me.

MV – You know, there's one other thing to say about Martha. You mentioned her partner Betty, and I think that she, unfortunately lived at a time when being a woman and being a Latina was oppressive to the point where it wasn't until her later life that I think she felt that she could take the initial step to come out as a lesbian. I think that it's unfortunate that she didn't live long enough to come out more fully, because I think we have so many women of colour lesbians who could have benefited from her modeling and mentoring. I know that she was in the process of getting that next level of courage to do that. I feel a loss that she died when she did, because I think she would have done that.

CF – I'm reminded [that] she told a story a couple of times, and I heard of how her family, her father, basically pushed her out of the family when she decided to go to college. He just thought that it was not worth educating women. He was very patriarchal about that and [when] she insisted on doing that, he basically cut her off from the family. I think he had to die before she was able to fully integrate herself back into her family.

MV – I think that's a good point, and I think she, like many of us, have so many experiences both within family, community and the wider society that either, again, facilitate or become obstacles in who we're able to be as fully as possible. So, that's a good example.

CF – So, in a way, her keeping her sexual orientation to herself was a way of protecting herself from the fear of being further disenfranchised or once again disenfranchised from, maybe, people she cares about or loves or her community.

MV – Yes. We will feel love and respect for her forever.

AR – I have a quick question. I don't think it will take too long to answer, but I just wanted to ask about the role that Division 35 has played in your professional life, and perhaps even personal life, I'm not sure.

MV – Sure, sure.

CF – Tell me about your involvement in Division 35.

MV – You know, Division 35 is one of the first three major divisions that I became involved in. Division 17, Counseling Psychology was who I call my home division, and I did receive a lot of mentoring from people in 17, and 45, the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues, I helped found and was part of the group that developed the bylaws and was the first council representative. I became an active member of 35 when Pam Reid was the first woman of colour to become president of

Division 35. She asked me to be program chair, and so I did do that and became part of the executive committee and just found the division to be awesome. First of all, it was inclusive. The board included not only the office chairs, but committee chairs and there were dozens and dozens of committees. So at the table, there were 40-50 people at every meeting. I just really enjoyed it and found it to be very empowering.

{55:23}

So when Laura Brown, who was president one year, asked me to run for president, I said, "You've got to be kidding!" Being president of the division was not on my radar screen at all. So Laura Brown was a strong, persuasive advocate/peer mentor who twisted my arm to run for president. I was so surprised to be elected. Then I appointed you program chair.

CF – (laughs) I know!

MV – I think there's something to being a program chair and then becoming president of the division, because now you're president elect of Division 35.

CF – And Laura Brown had been program chair for somebody as well.

MV – (laughs) I did not remember that! That's wonderful.

CF – That's right. I think there's something to it. My entry into the division was through you, when you appointed me as program chair. I haven't left it yet.

MV – I think that the division was my first foray into leadership at that level. I think that is a lot of what Division 35 has done has been to mentor leadership among women. That has been wonderful.

CF – What do you think the future of the division is or should be, (of course it's going to stay a feminist society) in terms of diversity we see in the world, or here in the United States?

MV – I really think that one of the main things that Division 35 has to do is to continue to help young women understand how important feminism is. So many young women think that everything is done now, and that they have equal rights, and so on, and that's so far from the truth. We have such a long way to go. I think we have to make sure that young women, in the profession especially, not only embrace the term 'feminism,' but truly understand, in depth, what that means in our lives. That's a difficult goal to promote, but we have to.

CF – We have to make it more relevant, because for so many women of colour, feminism to them means excluding the men in their lives; [it] means excluding their race or their ethnicity, right? And so, to include women of colour under the feminist umbrella, we

have to make it relevant to their lives so that they know that being a feminist means embracing those whom we love, but in a mutual way.

{58:20}

MV – Exactly. Yes, I think there's a huge misunderstanding of what feminism is. We, unfortunately have a conservative right movement that's trying to misportray what feminism is. I think we have to be proactive in how we help people understand that feminism is about being clear about choices, about helping young women be clear about the ways in which they've been socialized, which maybe damaging. It's a long road to haul, but we have to keep [at it].

CF – Especially in this cultural context, we have the society that we're in right now and the political forces that we're in, where other people are defining what feminism means, and they're wrong. We need to be that voice to correct, to say, to define what feminism means.

MV – I think we also need to talk about the various forms of feminism among women of colour for example, and how it gets expressed and embraced differently.

CF – As race women, as 'womenists.'

MV – Absolutely.

{End of DVD}