

Natalie Gonzalez, by Julie M. Luker

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Minnesota

CS: Cole Steinberg

NG: Natalie Gonzalez

CS: This is an interview conducted as part of a larger faculty and student research project initiated by Dr. Julie Luker of Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today is May 30th, 2023, and I'm here with Natalie Gonzalez. My name is Cole Steinberg, and I'm an undergraduate student at Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today, I'll be talking to Natalie about what life was like growing up in the Twin Cities. During this interview, I'm going to ask you to reflect on your childhood life experiences as they relate to a variety of social topics from that time period. For the purposes of this interview, we have identified childhood as birth through 17 years of age. To begin, please state and spell your full name, including a maiden name as applicable.

NG: All right. Well, my name is Natalie Vasquez Gonzalez. N-A-T-A-L-I-E, V-A-S-Q-U-E-Z, G-O-N-Z-A-L-E-Z.

CS: Please identify your race and gender.

NG: I am Hispanic, specifically Mexican, and I identify as female.

CS: Please state your date of birth.

NG: September 8th, 2003.

CS: Finally, please share where you grew up, such as the name of the neighborhood or a nearby street intersection. Include any major moves you made during this time period.

NG: I have lived in South Saint Paul my whole life, but the first location was Fifth Avenue South and Dale Street West. And then my older home was Third Street Avenue and 16th Avenue.

CS: Okay. Thank you. I would like to learn more about your family life. Let's begin with the memories you have for immediate and extended family. Please share some memories that you have about these relationships.

NG: There's a lot. I guess to begin in my older home that I lived in, I forgot how old that was, but I moved in 2013. I just remember my mom being a stay-at-home mom, very active. My dad would always [be] at work. He was always away, but he always made time for us. He'd always go on field

trips. He was still on hand with us. So, I remember that. My older brother, you know, he loved me. We played around. We messed around. There's a six-year age gap, so it's a bit difficult to get along that well. But I just remember being like a very loving, immediate family. I don't remember much of my extended family because we don't really interact with my dad's side who was here then. My mom's side of the family lives in California. So that's about it.

CS: Did you have any family pets growing up?

NG: Oh, yeah. I had a lot of pets. I had a lot of fish, a lot of turtles. At one point I had crabs and birds. But the longest was Sasha; she was my little Chihuahua pit bull mix. She recently passed away last year. I've had her since I was four. So that was a very hard loss. But she was always there. I just always remember her. We don't have a fence in our yard, so she'll always walk the entire neighborhood. And then neighbors will say, like, "Your dog is down the street". And we're like, "Oh, no!" But she was a very loving dog.

CS: How were household chores divided between members of your family?

NG: Originally it was mainly just my mom doing all the work, my dad doing some of it, but he was mostly away doing, you know, work and stuff. My brother and I started picking up more work once we came to this house. I was ten years old once we moved and my brother was like 16 or something at the time. So that's when we started dividing up the chores. But usually, it would all just fall on my mom, and I would just help occasionally. But it wasn't until I reached like older teenage years that I started doing more of the work as opposed to like my brother and my dad. So, I think it's just a lot of the women doing the work and the boys doing their work away.

CS: Thank you. Next, please describe the ways in which your family's economic status influenced your childhood.

NG: As I said before, my dad was working a lot. He works like two or three jobs at a time. He was constantly working. I think at one point he was working five jobs just to help support us and stuff. So, I think in that way it affected my childhood because he wasn't there as I wanted him to be when I was younger. I would always say, where's my dad? Or I'd call him while I'm eating. He still would show up without fail to all my field trips being a chaperon. Everyone loved him as a chaperone. That's like the biggest thing, I didn't really have my father there, but he was always there for the important things, so it makes up for it. I guess also I didn't have a lot of things to play with. So, when you're like a younger kid, you're always jealous about, like, the toys that people get. So, I got hand-me-downs, but I just got creative with how I played. But as I got older, especially in this house, I just cared less about our economic status. I feel like now, since it's improved, I'm just being more happy in our financial stability now. It did come with a bit of financial anxiety when I was younger. So there's that.

CS: Okay. In what way has your family's financial circumstances shaped your spending habits today?

NG: Oh. So, I do get very anxious when it comes to money. My parents would always talk finances around me from a very young age. So, it was always me hearing like, oh, we're hardly making enough money or we're just barely getting by. So up until recently, I've always been very, I don't want to spend any money. I save up all my money, even if it's something I really want and, like, save it. But it was until recently that I started being a bit freer with my money, just spending a bit more. You know, now that I'm making my own money. So, I'm buying things I really want. My parents still cover like, the needs that we have. I usually just spend it on books. I love reading, so I usually just spend most of my money on simple small pleasures, making sure I don't go too much

over how much I should spend. So, I think that's how my financial status when I was younger has influenced me now.

CS: Great. Now, I would like to know about your experiences with religion, such as Catholicism, Lutheranism, etc... Describe what you can recall about your family's religious practices when you were growing up.

NG: My family identify as Catholic. So, I always went to a church that was not that close to home. It was in West Saint Paul, but there was a lot of Hispanic people that attended there. So, we would also go. I just remember waking up every morning, like every Sunday, being very like, I don't want to go. I'm tired. I just want to go back to bed. But we'll always go. I think eventually we just stopped going because of conflicts with the church that we had. I think we didn't really focus too much on religion, if I'm being honest. Even now, we just say we believe in God, that we should confide in God, but we're not very connected to the whole religion as anymore. It's more so we're just connected to God in a way. It wasn't like a big, prominent aspect in my life growing up.

CS: Are you able to share a specific memory that stands out the most for you regarding your family's religion?

NG: I don't think there's one specific memory, but I just remember going to church all the time. Well, if there was one memory that stuck out to me, it was when I was a bit older, I think I was like 15, 16 or something. It was my last time going to church where we decided to go, and I forgot what the holiday was, and we just lit candles that we had, and we just did a prayer. And I just remember feeling very connected to God at that moment. But besides that, there wasn't like a very prominent memory that stands out to me.

CS: What, if any, impact do you feel that religion has had in your life?

NG: I think there is a really big impact that religion has on me because I still do believe in God. I pray every night. I just feel very connected to God, even as I'm getting older. I know I'm surrounded by a lot of people that don't believe in God or don't follow religion. But I don't let that sway me because I've had very difficult times where I would turn to God, and he would always answer me, so I have a very deep connection to God.

CS: Now I'd like to learn more about the neighborhood in which you grew up. If you moved during childhood, you may wish to reflect on more than one neighborhood. This is fine to do, but please indicate as you do it. Please describe what comes to mind when thinking about the neighborhood in which you grew up.

NG: So, the older home that I used to live in, I would say I felt very safe there. There were a lot of like older people around us. It was a lot of fun too, because there were people around my age when I was living there. I was just very happy. Even now, reflecting back on it, it's a lot of happy memories only because as I was so young, there wasn't much pressure going on or anything that really... No troubles going on because I was too young to realize anything. But now, since we've moved, I feel a little bit unsafe compared to the old home, only because of the neighbors. They're just very sketchy. But still, it was very calm growing up here. Like, there wasn't a lot going on, but it was definitely a lot more lonely because I wasn't surrounded by friends. There weren't a lot of people my age that lived very close by.

CS: Okay. There are a variety of ways to describe a neighborhood such as urban, suburban, rural, bustling, quiet, working class, upper class, etc... How would you describe your neighborhood when you lived there?

NG: The older home, I would say, is definitely more suburban. It was middle class, definitely, but more upper middle-class people. Everyone around us had cabins. We were the only ones that didn't. But the neighborhood I'm living in currently, I would say, is more of a working-class neighborhood. I think it shows a lot and how our neighborhood looks like. We're still getting through it. We're working people, so there's that.

CS: As far as transportation options, how did you typically get around town?

NG: When I was living at the other home, usually just my parents would take me. You know, I was too young to drive. I was only ten once we moved here. We would also take bikes or scooters to go to, like the Dairy Queen that was close by or go to the park, so there's that. But as I got older, just driving around as well. So, I never really had to take the bus unless it was like to go to my high school. Which is a bit further away from where I'm living and that I had to take the school bus.

CS: How well did the residents in your neighborhood know each other, and what were some of those relationships like?

NG: In my older home, we were very close to all of our neighbors. Greg and Sue, they're the people that lived to the left of us. They were like my grandparents growing up, because, you know, I didn't have my own grandparents here. So, they would look after us all the time. I just remember them always calling me a doll or like saying like, oh, she was like a little princess because my mom would dress me up like frilly dresses. Even though we've moved, we still have like, a connection to them. And we still talk all the time. We also visit them a lot. They would always, like, talk about like us growing up and how surprised they are by how mature we look now. And I remember I was best friends with the girl living behind me, like behind our house. Also, we were very close, and we even went to the same high school together because it was all within the same district. But we don't talk anymore, unfortunately. Now in this new place that we're living in, the more recent neighborhood, we have a lot of issues with some of our neighbors. But for the most part, our relationships with our neighbors are friendly, especially with the neighbors living to the left of us because we had to babysit their younger son. It was mostly me babysitting him since he was three months old and he's now seven. So, he's like my little brother and I do love that family. So, there's always a family connection everywhere we've gone so far.

CS: That's nice. We had to describe the best part about growing up in your neighborhood. What comes to mind?

NG: For the older one, it was definitely that there were a lot of girls my age. It was just fun having all the girls around the neighborhood come over, all of us playing dress up or making food out of the plants that we had in our backyard. So that was always fun. Even though I was four looking after two-year-olds, babysitting kids around me was so fun. I think that even shows here in the more recent neighborhood where I, you know, even though I'm the youngest here and like, there's no... Well, there are younger kids now, but at the time I was the youngest. There was no one around my age. It was still nice babysitting the neighbor's kid. Once I did start going to the school that's close to here, making friends and being able to hang out with them after school. So those were definitely the most stand out memories from my childhood.

CS: Next, I would like to learn about the values shared by your family and your neighbors. Values are principles or standards that help guide behavior. What memories come to mind that demonstrate what these values were for your family and your neighbors?

NG: So definitely acceptance and community. I was actually thinking about that question, especially in like the more recent neighborhood. But I know in the older neighborhood I lived in acceptance was a really big thing because we were the only nonwhite family in that neighborhood. Everyone else around us were white, so it was a bit tricky to navigate that. But we definitely were able to feel accepted because there's a lot of people that are curious about our culture and wanting to get to know us and some people taking the time out of their day to learn Spanish for us and asking for like ingredients on things. That was definitely the biggest value. I think here it's still community because we all still come together if there's a troubling time or something happening around our neighborhood. We're all still very much together, so community for sure.

CS: In what way were your values similar to or different from others who lived in your neighborhood at that time?

NG: I think for the most part my values were the same in all of my neighborhoods that I lived in. I think the values have been pretty much the same because, you know, since I was very young in the older neighborhood, I was raised on like the values I saw around me. And as I'm older, I'm still seeing the same values. So, I don't think there's much of a difference between what I value and like what I see around me.

CS: Now, I'm going to ask you all about leisure time. Describe some of the ways in which you, your family and your neighbors engaged in leisure time when you were growing up.

NG: Oh, all of the parents were like, sit out in the alleyway in our older neighborhood because all of the kids love to play there. Ride their scooters. Ride their bikes. So, there's a lot of parents just sitting around watching us. And then there was like our neighbors, the older neighbors would always sit out in their lawn or go walks around the neighborhood. I also remember being younger and my mom taking us on a walk around the neighborhood as well. We'll just do a little loop. So, there's definitely that. And also, there was a park nearby our house in the older one, or also this one too, but in the older one. Since I was younger, we have loved going to the park. There was a playground. There are soccer nets. So, we'll play soccer, or we'll play in the playground, and do fun things. And there was also a church, but for the most part it was a very empty parking lot at the church. So, it was just a lot of kids riding their scooters and bikes around the parking lots that was really fun. That's usually what we would do. And also, parents would just watch us as well, making sure no one's getting hurt.

CS: Can you recall if your family ever took vacations? And if so, to where?

NG: The only vacation that we had ever was going to California, and that was always a road trip. So, we would always take, like, a 28 hour or longer road trip, which to some sounds impossible because California is so far from Minnesota. But my dad will drive all the way through, no sleeping. So very impressive. That was our only vacation really, because then like our other vacations it would just be like stopping us in the States on our way back, but for the most part it was just going to California to visit family there.

CS: Okay, so you kind of made a road trip of it.

NG: Mm hmm. Yeah.

CS: Okay, cool. Uh, growing up, how did you meet new friends?

NG: In the older neighborhood, it was just seeing like just seeing everyone, like playing outside, people playing in their own lawns, and then like someone approaching the other person being like,

you're around my age; let's have let's be friends. I distinctly remember, my best friend from my childhood, how we met was because our younger brother ran up our hill and... Like running up the hill in one of her gymnastics leotards and her being like, I'm sorry, that's my younger brother. And then us, making a conversation, and we would always hang out after that. Then in this newer neighborhood, I started going to the elementary school here. So, I was able to meet all the people that are also living around the elementary school. So that's how I also made friends, just meeting friends through school, especially now knowing that it was a whole district. So, I was going to one elementary school and the other, which was within the same district, but there was a rivalry going on. But that's how I made friends.

CS: Was there a local hangout spot in your neighborhood where you could be with your friends? If yes, describe it.

NG: Well, South Saint Paul is very small, so there's not much to do around here. But in the older neighborhood, it was definitely Veterans Field, or Vets Field, that we would call it. It's just a field and it had soccer nets and they had like a small playground and all the kids would go there. Now that I'm older, people would like to go to Black Sheep, which is a cafe not too far from here, a very small cafe. There's also the swing bridge, which is just such a small bridge that you can just like look over the Mississippi. That's where people usually go. But I think now it's like my older teens, people just start driving further away from South Saint Paul. So going to just downtown Saint Paul or something as opposed to staying within South Saint Paul.

CS: Okay. What television shows did you watch growing up?

NG: Ooh. Dora the Explorer. Because, you know, I had to learn Spanish and English, so I watched a lot of that. I also remember watching a lot of Max and Ruby. It's my comfort show, so I'm still watching it. And a lot of true crime documentaries, surprisingly from a very young age. But nothing really... It didn't scare me. It actually led me to want to be a psychology major. So, there's that. And a lot of George Lopez.

CS: Which bands or music genres were your favorite?

NG: Well, being a young teen girl, it was definitely One Direction. I listened to a lot of One Direction. How a little emo phase eventually. You know, listen to a lot of Pierce the Veil, Black Veil Brides, Sleeping with Sirens. And eventually that led to me listening to K-Pop. Somehow there was a correlation. But when I was younger, it was a lot of Justin Bieber. And I had a whole wall of just his posters, all of him, all his t shirts. I had even a Justin Bieber themed birthday party when I was younger. So. Big fan.

CS: Okay. As an adult, have you kept in touch with any friends from your childhood?

NG: Not from my older neighborhood, unfortunately. I've been trying to find her but can't find that best friend. For the life of me, I can't find her. But we do keep in touch with our older neighbors. And I do keep in touch with nearly everyone I went to elementary school with, or that I consider my friends because we ended up. Not only was it a district between elementary schools, but it was even high school that you went to class with them. So, I've known these people since second grade, and I've kept in touch with them ever since. So yeah.

CS: Next, let's discuss your experience with schooling. Please describe what it was like going to school as a child.

NG: I was at three different elementary schools. So, the first one was Cesar Chavez, and I felt very accepted there because everyone there was Hispanic. So, there was a lot of like Spanish speaking people. We always celebrated indigenous culture and we always celebrated like all the Mexican holidays or, you know, just a lot of acceptance all around. But once I transferred over to Lincoln when I was younger, it was a very big change. Because I went from being surrounded by people that looked like me to suddenly being around people that were mostly white, and no one spoke Spanish. And then I was pulled into ESL classes. So, it was like, I can speak English too, but they just assumed I couldn't. So, they just put me in English as a second language courses. It just felt very isolating. I was even bullied during that time, so I didn't enjoy my time there. But I did enjoy going to Kaposia, met a lot of good friends here. There was nothing that really stood out to me in that elementary school. It wasn't until high school where I started feeling a bit more confused because, you know, you're in high school, you know, you're growing up and... But I also found like a good close friend group there. I was actually starting to have a good time until the pandemic just cut everything off. So, then I was isolated from everyone and that was horrible. So, my high school experience was definitely different than most.

CS: Yep. The school lunch hour has changed over the years. Can you recall how your school handled the lunch hour when you were a student?

NG: I didn't really pay attention to the lunch hour. I just wanted to eat when it was time to eat. I just remember in high school being like, I hated how we would have lunch between like we would have a class period and then between, like in the middle of the class period we would go and have lunch and come back. I mean, it benefited us for like some classes because then you can like get in some study time or you would be taking a test and then mid test is like time to go to lunch. So, then we're like, okay, well let's talk about the test that we just took. I don't really remember much about things like the lunch hour or changes. In all honesty, I don't even think I ever paid attention to the time. I just remember, like, everyone says, what lunch do you have? So, we can all, like, join in for lunch together. I don't remember the timing of lunches.

CS: Okay. Um, did you guys have, like, closed lunch? You had to eat at the cafeteria, at the school, or were you guys allowed to kind of go out and go get food outside of school and come back?

NG: No, we were not allowed to do that. We were only allowed to have whatever, like, the cafeteria was serving. Some people would bring in lunch from outside or have, like, parents drop them off. But, you know, you were kind of expected to stay in school. But we did have flexible learning time. And some people thought it was convenient for lunch time because the previous class, they didn't have to have to go to that class to have lunch then. But for the most part, we were always told to stay within the high school, but some people would still just go out and eat.

CS: Which teacher stands out to you most in your memory and why?

NG: There's a couple. There's my sixth-grade teacher, but for the worst reasons. He was... Yeah. But anyways, for good reasons, I love Mr. Moore. He was my chemistry teacher in high school. He was amazing. He even wrote all of his students a graduation note and mailed them all. My friend was like, "Yeah, he gave me \$20", and for me, he wrote-- I always laughed at his dad jokes. No one laughs at his dad jokes, only me. So, he wrote, like, the first part of the dad joke. And then once I closed the card, it was the punch line, you know. So, I remember just breaking down, crying, reading that. And then there was also Ms. Cornell, who was another science teacher. She was like a mom to everyone. She was the one that spoke at our graduation. She was just amazing as well. She was very sweet and loving to everyone. Even now we occasionally email. So, but for my elementary school days, I don't really remember most of my teachers, or if I do, it's not for the best reason. So, there's that.

CS: For our final topic, I'm going to ask you to reflect on local and global issues such as war, poverty, discrimination, social unrest, etc. In your opinion, what were some of the biggest local or global issues affecting the people in your neighborhood when you were growing up?

NG: Well, when I was younger, in the older neighborhoods, since I moved when I was ten, I didn't really recognize many things going on. I think I was just so in my own little bubble, like having fun being a girl, you know. So, I don't remember much from that time. But even when I was reflecting back on it, I still don't remember many things that were like. I don't know. I don't really remember many issues going on in that neighborhood because, again, it was mostly older people living there. So, what kind of issues could they really cause? But in this newer neighborhood, a more recent one, there's a lot of substance abuse going on and it's very obvious. That's a really big issue, especially because there are now very young kids living around here. I'm constantly on edge for, like, my neighbor's kid, because sometimes he'll play outside and I'm like, oh, there's someone pulling up for sure doing a drug deal here. So, I got to look out for him. So, but other than that, I don't think there's many issues also here. It's just that one very big issue that we have spoken to cops about, but they just seem to brush it off and turn away from the issue, which is very frustrating, but not much we can do about it at this point.

CS: How safe or unsafe do you feel in light of these issues?

NG: Well, as I said earlier, I felt a lot more safe for my older neighborhood because, again, mostly old people or people my age. So there wasn't much things to be worried about. But in this newer neighborhood, it was a very big adjustment. I felt a lot more unsafe, not unsafe to the point where it's like uncomfortable, but it was like, I need to be more cautious around the people I talk to. In the older neighborhood, I was able to just walk outside of my house, go to my back yard and go over to my neighbor and play, or we'll get other kids to play with us. But now in this neighborhood, growing up, it was a lot of just play within the fence. Just stay within your own backyard. Don't go out, don't. Which was upsetting. And then whenever I would go to a park, like my mom would always walk me there to meet up with friends. So it was very clear that it wasn't the safest neighborhood. But it also wasn't that unsafe. You just need to be a bit more cautious.

CS: What messages did you receive about how to treat people who are different from you in some way?

NG: If I'm being completely honest, I don't think my parents really spoke much about it. In fact, I think they just set an example. Especially my dad. He would always go out of his way to help the people around him, but they would never specifically implement any type of message of like, this is how you treat people. It was just, m watching them, you know, monkey see monkey do. So, I just did whatever I saw them do, which for the most part, was very kind and nice and welcoming to everyone. Even now, that's still the example that they set for me. So, I've always kind of been the same way of, I don't discriminate against a person. I don't, like, go out of my way to treat someone horribly. But I also I just treat everyone the same until someone gives me a reason not to, if that makes sense.

CS: What sticks out to you as some of the most serious health threats to people in your community, such as a specific disease or illness?

NG: Well, I guess going back to the whole substance abuse thing, because it's very obvious that there are people, unfortunately, in this neighborhood that do suffer with some type of addiction. It is very upsetting to see, and especially because some of them do have their own kids. So, it's like, you know, I don't know. There's not much to say on it other than it's very upsetting to see. I wish, like,

law enforcement would step up a bit more. Even if it's like. Not necessarily like arrest them, but always do something about it. Not only for the safety of our neighborhood or for the kids, but also just for their own sake as well as for their health as well.

CS: Is there anything else you want to comment on in regard to local and global issues? Just once over.

NG: I mean, I guess in recent years it has been a bit of a fear of like school shootings, you know, especially because I live directly across from it. Well, there's still a couple houses away from an elementary school. That's always kind of been a fear of mine. Now, recently, you know, what if. I think about these sorts of situations, especially because, like, my neighbor has a kid that I'm very attached to. He is seven years old, and I watch her walk him to class every day. I'm just like, let's hope nothing happens. Let's hope. You know, it's just that whole issue. And oh, no, that's always been a what if thing in my head of like, well, what should I do? Since I was so close to an elementary school? Like, do I also have to protect myself in some way or do I help the kids somehow? Or what would I do in that situation? So that is like an issue that's been on my mind recently. But other than that, it's still just substance abuse around here.

CS: Okay. This is the end of our interview. Your responses are invaluable, and we really appreciate that you took the time to do this today. Thank you so much for participating.