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Oral history interview with Paola Cintrón Matías, September 30, 2022

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ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Paola Cintrón Matías

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Paola Cintrón Matías conducted by Benny Marcano Tirado on September 30, 2022. This interview is part of course work done by students at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Interviewer: Benny Marcano Tirado

Interviewee: Paola Cintrón Matías

Date: Friday, September 30th, 2022

Method: Discord voice call

[0:00:04] Benny

Hello, my name is Benny Marcano Tirado and I will be conducting this interview today. It is currently 4:25 PM on Friday, September 30th. Narrator, can you please state your full name, your age, and where you currently live?

[0:00:22] Paola

My name is Paola Cintrón Matías, I'm 18 years old and I currently live in Trujillo Alto, Puerto Rico.

[0:00:29] Benny

Thank you. Um, do I have permission to record this interview? Are you okay with me sharing this interview, having it graded and possibly published in a book?

[0:00:38] Paola

Yes.

[0:00:40] Benny

Okay. Thank you. So how have you been?

[0:00:46] Paola

I've been doing well considering recent, uh, events.

[0:00:48] Benny

Oh yeah those events have been... the events, that have transpired, have been really nerve wracking. Uh, but what have you been doing lately?

[0:00:59] Benny Paola

Well, lately I've been in my home studying for my degree.

[0:01:05] Benny

Okay.

[0:01:07] Paola

Also recovering from a recent hospitalization, but still doing well despite the events.

[0:01:03] Benny

Can you tell us more about that? What happened?

[0:01:17] Benny Paola

Well, I suffer from respiratory, uh, difficulties. I'm, uh, chronic asthmatic and because of recent, uh, weather problems, the, the climate hasn't really been the best for my condition and it has basically caused for me to end up in the hospital because of the different, uh, quality and air affecting my condition.

[0:01:45] Benny Paola

Oh, okay. Uh, but are you okay now? Or do you feel better?

[0:01:50] Paola

Yeah, so with uh, my treatment currently and the fact that I am not leaving my household ever since I left the hospital, I am doing a lot better.

[0:01:59] Benny

Oh, that's great. That's great. Uh, I'm happy for you.

[0:02:03] Paola

Thank you. Thank you.

[0:02:06] Benny

So, uh, putting a site that, has anything cool happened to you lately?

[0:02:13] Paola

Well, I started recently on a new venture in terms of a new bachelor's degree that I've gotten interested in and I'm very excited to continue my work to getting my degree. It is in biomedical engineering, and I very much look forward to being able to do all the types of things that I am interested in the medical aspect, like research and things involving, uh, medical development.

[0:02:40] Benny

Okay well, what do you have in mind for the future after you finish your degree?

[0:02:45] Paola

After my degree, uh, I think I might go into the medical business. I might go into studying medicine itself, uh, maybe earning a PhD and specializing in oncology and hematology.

[0:03:00] Benny

Okay. That's pretty cool and not gonna lie. That's pretty cool.

[0:03:06] Benny

Um, before we start the interview, uh, I wanna get to know you even more. You know, in a more personal note, uh, what are some of your hobbies?

[0:03:11] Paola

Well, some of my hobbies include, uh, playing video games. Uh, I very much like the aspect of just having a good game to play with your friends and having something in common with a lot of different people that you can just hop on and meet different people to interact with and have the same ups and downs in the game as the other person. Uh, I really love music as well. I'm always looking for new artists and new genres to look into and enjoy their, you know, their uniqueness and their, hm, their specialty in, in each way. But I don't really like country. It's like me being a lover of music. I don't really like country. Uh, what else? I really like coffee. I very much like coffee as well. It's something that, uh, I've tried to venture more into, into the aspect of harvesting and growing coffee, which has been a recent hobby.

[0:04:13] Benny

Okay.

[0:04:14] Paola

And I really like true crime. I like true crime shows and I like history. I'm a very big world war two nerd.

[0:04:28] Benny

That's pretty cool, man. Like, lets break that down a little bit, what are some of your favorite games to play?

[0:04:36] Paola

Some of my favorite games? Uh, well, my favorite game of all time depends on the day that you're asking me. Sometimes it can be a Persona 5 Royal, sometimes it can be Mirror's Edge Catalyst. Uh, they've had a lot of big impacts in my life considering that they're both very philosophy driven games. Uh, there, there are games that have impacted me a lot in terms of, uh, my state of mind and how I interpret different situations in life. Uh, very much like Ghost Of Tsushima, uh, as well, and at least for now, those are the games that I can definitely say that are my absolute favorite games.

[0:05:12] Benny

Nice picks. Nice picks, really. Um, I, I wanted to ask, uh, obviously your favorite genres country, as you told me, of course, uh, but what are, what's your second, or at least one of the other favorite genres in music that you have

[0:05:29] Paola

Apart from country? Uh, my least favorite apart from country?

[0:05:38] Benny

No, no, no. Not least. Like your most favorite, because I know country is your most favorite, of course.

[0:05:46] Paola

Oh, of course, of course. But in, in actually my most, most favorite, I think it would be indie pop, indie folk. Uh, just anything involving indie or pop punk type of stuff, I really, really, really enjoy. It's just things that you can suddenly catch me listening to Takoshki and then out of nowhere, just listening to Slipknot, I have a very big variety, but Indie folk or Pop punk are probably like my both, uh, two of my favorite ones.

[0:06:21] Paola

Yeah. You're gonna have to hit me up with some artists after this. Uh, I'm already interested,

[0:06:25] Paola

Absolutely

[0:06:28] Benny

Uh, but you told me, you told me, that you're also venturing into coffee and stuff. Um,

[0:06:33] Paola

Yeah.

[0:06:35] Benny

And like planting and stuff. How has that been? How has that experience been for you?

[0:06:38] Paola

Well, considering recently how there have been a lot of storms and a lot of atmospheric, uh, situations, uh, the coffee industry in, in Puerto Rico has been greatly affected because of these things. Because, uh, we see the harvest and how they're affected by all the floodings and all the storms and everything, which is interesting to think about considering that. The crops that were, that are, for example, today, if there rains, if it rains a lot today, the harvest that was supposed to be for today, that's not gonna be seen as an, uh, economic impact in Puerto Rico until the next year. It's a very, uh, year to year economic system or economic basis in Puerto Rico. Considering that Puerto Rico before Hurricane Maria, for example, was one of the, I believe, the third biggest coffee distributor in the world. And considering how a lot of these things have impacted Puerto Rico's economy and how coffee itself has been so greatly embedded into Puerto Rico's culture, it's something that I've gotten a great interest towards.

[0:07:50] Benny

Oh, okay. I didn't know that. I, I never perceived it as that big, Um, I knew, I knew, uh, Puerto Rico was like a... You know, it had a lot of agricultural needs and stuff, and the storm really, really messed with that. I heard that we're not even gonna have a lot of, uh, plantains or Yeah. Uh, for, for,

[0:08:09] Paola

Yeah.

[0:08:10] Benny

For the holidays. So, like, hearing that, it, it's really interesting to, to know, to, uh, really dive into that. Uh, I'm really happy. I'm really happy. Um, so anyways, uh, what does your educational history look like? Like what schools have you studied in, in your lifetime?

[0:08:33] Paola

I've studied in a quite a few schools from in my lifetime. I don't know if you're gonna, if you consider things like Head Start to be an official start in school or anything like that, but I'd say... I've hopped quite a few schools. I, I was in one school, preK and kindergarten, then another school from first to third. Then from third up until fifth or sixth grade, I was in another school. Then from sixth to eighth I was in another one. And then my, my most recent one was my high school, which is the only one that I actually stayed in for a really long period of time, which was

four years. But I was in creative learning school first up until kindergarten, uh, Santa Maria del Camino. From first to third grade, Cubert Maria Montesoris, which recently closed down, sadly, from fourth up until sixth grade, which is the school where I made two grades in one year because, uh, um, in fourth grade. I had a few psychometric, uh, tests done on me, which basically said that I need, I wasn't really getting the challenge that I needed at an academic level. So my psychologist basically had told the school, "Hey, um, she very much needs to be bumped up a level because the things that she's learning now are things that you already knows are things that are really boring to her, and she just needs a new challenge" So I, I did fourth grade from August to December, and in that same school year, I jumped up a grade to fifth grade from January to May. And then after that, I continued sixth grade in that same school for about two months. Then I skipped to St. Monica bilingual school from sixth, like two months into sixth grade up until eighth grade. And then I went into University high school, which is a specialized, uh, math and science school from ninth grade. And that was when I made my entire senior career. And I stayed stable in that school until my graduation.

[0:10:57] Benny

All right. Yeah. And this, that's where we met.

[0:11:01] Paola

That's true. That's where he met .

[0:11:04] Benny

Yeah. So, um, tell me more about this school. So what was your, like, what was your overall experience with it?

[0:11:10] Paola

My overall experience, although it can be a school that a lot of people can perceive it as being the toughest school or the most mentally draining, the more academically challenging. Yes, you can get extremely drained, extremely stressed, but at the same time it's a school where at least you feel and you know that you're going to get the most out of your education. And that even though you're going through a very tumultuous time while you're being there, you know that it's for the better and... So you can get the best level of education possible.

[0:11:49] Benny

Hmm. I agree.

[0:11:53] Paola

Because a lot of, I don't, I don't know if you remember, but a lot of the topics that we studied in our school, there aren't being given in a lot of other schools. I don't see a lot of people taking trigonometry. I don't see a lot of people taking, uh, upper statistics or precalculus classes or anything up, uh, other than precalculus. It's really, it's something that in our school, for example, you have to take a test, if I remember correctly, you have to take a test in ninth grade to get in from the first year, and then you have to take another test in 10th grade so that you can secure your position in the school. Then you take the standardized test for the whole island in. And then in 12, uh, you take another for the college, uh, exams. It's a constant testing facility for students and it, it can be really draining cause it can be extremely mentally and even physically draining for the students. But at the same time, you have to take into consideration that you're fighting for your spot and it's for a spot to be with the best education possible. Which at the same time is kind of, you know, a little bit unfair because students that come from other schools that maybe don't have the same amount of education as we did, don't maybe don't have the same opportunity to have the same education as we do.

[0:13:23] Benny

Yeah. Yeah. And, and yeah, you're right. You, you're right. And the fact that, uh, some of the students, the, the student, uh, we as people that came in, in ninth grade, you know, as students that we came in in ninth grade, we had an advantage, uh, over the people in 10th grade as well because they,

[0:13:42] Paola

Yes.

[0:13:43] Benny

Yeah. Because they, um, had a fewer chances to get in because we already, uh, were stabled there and over. Uh, overall it's, it's a very tantalizing experience. Experience at an academic level. But it was also a really good one, like you said. And overall, it is a, it is a great school. It is a great school. Um, do I recommend it? Yes. Would I say that it is perfect. No, I wouldn't say that.

[0:14:14] Paola

I wouldn't say it's perfect.

[0:14:17] Benny

Yeah, it was really draining at times, but overall, I do appreciate it and I do appreciate being there.

[0:14:23] Paola

Yeah. Cause it's, it's an experience. You also have to see it as the fact that it's an experience that not everyone has been able to go through, because of course, not everyone's high school experience is gonna be the same, but specifically in a, I guess in a specialized school ambiance, it's not the same because. You feel like there's constantly people around you that may or may not be better than you in something, and it's at the same time, it could be draining, but you shouldn't let it drain you because instead of using it to drain yourself, you should use it as a way to motivate yourself into being something better. There was always someone in the class that was trying to be as best as they can in something, and you always had to use that as a form to drive yourself into becoming better. You always had to use that as a drive to basically just be the best you possible so that you had your thing. Because I, I, if I remember correctly, everyone had their thing. Basically. There was always someone that was, even though they weren't that good at math, they were better at academic, uh, sports, uh, things like, uh, the, the basketball team. People wouldn't think that a specialized science school would have a good basketball team. And we did have a pretty good basketball team because, not necessarily because you're from a purely, purely, purely academically principal school means that we're not gonna have people that are maybe better in the athletic aspect. People that maybe weren't good at science, were good at math, that weren't good at math, were good at history. There was always someone trying to be the best that they could ever be in something no matter what.

[0:16:11] Benny

Yep. And it, it's evidence as well because, uh, after we got outta school, you know, after we graduated, you could see a lot of our classmates and like just going to colleges, uh, like very prestigious colleges, you know,

[0:16:25] Paola

Very prestigious colleges, yes.

[0:16:27] Benny

Yes. Yeah. And, uh, I, I've seen some of them go like outside of Puerto Rico. Some of them have stayed here and they are studying something like really, you know, ambitious as well. A lot was our studying something really big, something that we they really like. Um, and trans uh, trans, uh, moving... onto that, um, what college do you go to?

[0:16:49] Paola

Right now I'm going, uh, I'm attending the Polytech University of Puerto Rico, which is where I'm doing the, uh, bachelor's in biomedical engineering.

[0:17:01] Benny

Hmm. And how has it been treating you so far?

[0:17:05] Paola

It's been treating me pretty well actually recently... it's kind of, I kind of feel back at home when it comes to this because in, in University (*University Gardens High School, where we both studied*) we would always feel like we're going extremely fast and that we were always had to cover a lot of, lot, a lot of ground in material in a really short amount of time so that we could take all the testing possible and that we could do all of the things possible in that short amount of time. But, I kind of feel right at home when it comes to this because the Polytech University is by trimester, basically, uh, what trimester means is that the entire school year is divided into terms of three months. So you have to cover entire classes instead of in a semester, which is about five months, you have to cover it in three, and it, it's extremely fast. It basically, if you miss a class, you're missing an entire, an entire topic. But I think it's a lot better because it constantly keeps people on their feet. It constantly keeps people trying to get as much information as possible and looking for as much alternatives as possible, and it never leaves you to rest in. In a sense of you always have to be on your feet and you always have to look for things to keep yourself busy, because if you're not busy, maybe you're missing something.

[0:18:35] Benny

Yeah. I, I, I do agree. Um, personally, college has been treating me very well as well. And like in general, I feel like it's way more... a more, yeah, more smoother experience than University Gardens. Uh, not just because of the classes and, you know, because we're kind of prepared in a sense, uh, thanks to University Gardens, but also because of the schedules. You know, it's not, we don't have like a bunch of classes one day and like, like just arrive, drained as heck, uh, by the end of the day to later, uh, have to study and stuff. Like overall, after a week of university gardens, you were pretty much just drained to all end.

[0:19:22] Paola

Yeah

[0:19:23] Benny

Uh, but here, um, we have a little more room, a more wiggle room...

[0:19:25] Paola

Oh totally.

[0:19:26] Benny

...and over a lot to study and, you know Yeah, exactly. A lot more, uh, time for us to, you know, settle down. Uhm...

[0:19:34] Paola

Totally, totally. The fact that in university, our classes were from seven thirty to four ten every day, plus our classes are a hundred minutes per class. It took me a while to adjust in college when it was suddenly one class per day, maybe not even for like an hour. It, it took me a while cause it felt like I wasn't doing enough, but I was doing exactly right.

[0:20:00] Benny

Yeah. Those 50 minute classes that I'm taking now, I've really, it's just saved me. Like I just, I feel so great by the time the end and they, they do not feel, they do not feel, uh, long and, but at the same time they feel perfect. You know?

[0:20:17] Paola

Yeah. It's like the perfect in between of information, but also time to rest and study for the class.

[0:20:23] Benny

Mhmm. Um, so anyways, uh, can you describe. Ho, how does university looks? Do, have you ever paid attention to that? Can you describe it to me?

[0:20:43] Paola

I guess you could, you could describe the way that it looks as very modern, because the university, it's a private university and they've been doing a lot of remodeling recently towards the grounds and everything. But you can basically just, whenever I say modern, especially in the 21st century, you could basically imagine just really minimalistic, but architecturally very well fought out buildings. Uh, it's a very, you think it's a really, really small college, but in reality, when you actually go into the campus itself, it's a pretty, pretty extensive, uh, campus. I believe there's three to four floors per every building. With, uh, each having its own section for every bachelor's laboratory, because every bachelor has, has its own like lab section. So there's a section for biomedical, uh, engineering. There's a section for chemical engineering. There's one

for mechanical engineering. Every single aspect of every single, single singular bachelor's, uh... in the college itself has its own like lab section. The library's beautiful as well. It's about three floors, and it's absolutely beautiful.

[0:22:01] Benny

Dang. I wanna see it now. . I really wanna see that library. Um, and the campus, uh, itself, like, uh, well the camp, you just pretty much explained it, but how would you say the, uh, the atmosphere is.

[0:22:27] Paola

The atmosphere? You really notice that people are there because they want to be the best that they can possible because everyone is extremely work driven. It, it's, it's like you go into a place and you just know that everyone there is completely 100% focused into doing what they want to do and accomplishing what they want to do, and they're not gonna let absolutely anyone get in their way. It's like that. It's that sort of feeling that, okay, people here really want to be the best that they can, and people here are gonna work hard and if, if you're not the type to work hard for your stuff, you're not gonna get anywhere and you're not gonna fit in here.

[0:23:08] Benny

Mm.

[0:23:11] Paola

Which it's very motivational. At least for me. It's something really motivational.

[0:23:17] Benny

Yeah, no, I would assume. Yeah, no, it really does seem like a very, a nice atmosphere to be studying under.

[0:23:24] Paola

And everyone's really nice because whenever, uh, because of the fact that it's a, I guess a... quote on quote "small college" comparing it to, uh, any of the University of Puerto Rico campuses, cause like if you compare any of those campuses to the Polytechnic School, uh, it's pretty small. So people have found it really easy to interact with each other. You can literally be talking about any type of topic and a random person next to you that knows about the topic starts talking about it with you. Boom. You made a friend, uh, two people from the other side. Listen to what you two are talking about. Boom, you made two more friends and then everyone can like slowly gets

to know each other. And it's really easy to make friends because of the fact that everyone is very alike.

[0:24:18] Benny

Oh, that's, that's pretty cool that, that, that is actually really, really nice. Um, over here in, uh, Mayaguez, eh, it's mostly the specific cl, like my concentrated classes where I find people like more willing to like, hang out and like talk and like, make friends with.

And my other more general classes, like Spanish and English, everybody seems really quiet and doesn't wanna, uh, socialize a lot because they're just there to like, just take this class and get out, you know?

[0:24:50] Paola

Mmhmm.

[0:24:51] Benny

So like, hearing that, no, that hearing that makes me kind of jealous in a sense. But yeah. Anyways, uh, let's move back a little bit or, a lot actually. Can you tell me, uh, where were you born and when?

[0:25:10] Paola

Hmm. I was born in San Juan, even though I live right now in Trujillo Alto, but I was born in San Juan. I was born December 23rd, 2003. Uh, I believe in Auxilio Mutuo.

[0:25:30] Benny Paola

All right. Um, and for your first couple years of life or overall where you grew up, where, where did you live?

[0:25:38] Paola

I lived in Carraizo, Haciendas de Carraizo, which is an urbanization over here, Lake Carraizo, which is basically the big "represa" that helps give water to the metro area.

[0:25:56] Benny

Alright. And can you describe this house to me?

[0:25:58] Paola

The house was, it was a one story house. It had a balcony. Uh, it would have a really, really big. Family room when you entered the house, and then it would have the dining room, the little dining call with a little table.

It would have an Lshaped kitchen and then a hallway where you would have one bathroom on your left. My brother's room, my parents' room, and then the last room in the hall was my room.

[0:26:37] Benny

All right. Um, and do you have any siblings that shared this home with you at the time?

[0:26:40] Paola

Yeah, my little brother. I, I'm the eldest and only daughter in my house, and I have a younger brother.

[0:26:45] Benny

How old is he right now?

[0:26:49] Paola

He's 15 at the time.

[0:26:55] Paola

All right. Uh, what grade is he in and what like school does he go to?

[0:26:57] Paola

Right now he is in 10th grade and he goes to Dascalos, which is a private school over here, close to my house.

[0:27:10] Paola

Oh, okay. Uh, can you describe your relationship with him?

[0:27:18] Paola

Uh, I guess whenever you ask someone how their relationship was with their sibling, they can basically describe it as bipolar. Uh, cause you know, usual siblings, suddenly I love you. Suddenly I want you, uh, outta here.

[0:27:33] Benny Paola

That's fair. That's fair.

[0:27:34] Paola

But usually we are pre on pretty good terms. It's also, you know, the puberty aspect of a 15 year old

[0:27:48] Paola

Damn. Okay. All I forgot to ask, but what was his name, if you don't mind me uh...

[0:27:52] Paola

His name is his name is Jan, but, uh, I always call him by his first and last and second name, which is Jan Carlos. All right. You, whenever you're referring to him, you always hear both names.

[0:28:09] Benny

Yeah, that's true. That's how I know him.

[0:28:10] Paola

Yeah, exactly. Like people, people don't really know that, uh, his name is just Jan cause everyone just calls him Jan Carlos. And they just assume that's his full name or no, it's just, people just don't like to call him just Jan. So they call him by both names.

[0:28:27] Benny

It just feels kind of short. Like it feels like kind of incomplete.

[0:28:30] Paola

Feels like it's missing something.

[0:28:32] Benny Paola

Yeah. Okay. Um, I'm gonna like go back a little bit to the topic we discussed earlier about your, your hobbies and like stuff, but, uh, I wanna move more into like how your hobbies or like interest in general, how did that shape you as a person?

[0:28:51] Paola

Well, I guess that it shaped me as a person considering that because of things like online video gaming, I've turned into a person that's very sociable. Uh, I used to be really reclusive when I was a kid. I used to be extremely quiet when I was a kid. I wouldn't really talk with that many people. And when it comes to things like when I found music, when I found online, video gaming and all of that, those different types of topics, I've basically learned to create more of a social bug in me, and I've learned to. I try and communicate as much as possible with people and interact with people and try and help people as much as I can. Because while you never know when, like, what someone can be going through at the moment, and you never know what a simple hello or a simple interaction can change a person's life or a person's perspective or your own input into their own problems can change their perspective. So with things like gaming and, and socializing online, I've basically just pumped that into my own social skills, uh, face to face with other people.

[0:30:07] Benny Paola

Oh, okay. I see. Yeah, no, I, I, I can see that. Uh, and what do you think is like the biggest change to your identity that's made you, the person you are today? Like what's something that really impacted you to being who you are?

[0:30:24] Paola

Hmm. That's a, that's a really, that's a really good question. Considering the fact that I've gone through many different tumultuous times, uh, I've gone through a lot of things in my life that have basically shaped me into what I am. Uh, different people have done different things towards me, different aspects and different times have, you know, made me into the person that I am. Uh, and will some situations happen where you don't really learn from them and you keep trying to

be the same person that you used to be? Well, because of you don't like change that much, and you're trying to be that one person that would always be forgiving. For example, if someone did you wrong and you're trying to be as forgiving as possible, even though you know that the person doesn't deserve to be, uh, forgiven. Uh, But I guess in, in situations where, for example, uh, I've had a few friends that have basically turned their backs on me. When, you know, when things were really, really rough, uh, I was at my lowest points. I was in going through a very bad, uh, posttraumatic stress disorder situation. Uh, I had lost my house actually after Hurricane Maria, uh, since there was an accident with the generator where it had exploded and I lost my home due to a fire after that. Uh, a few of my friends basically just did not want anything to do with me because they didn't want to, you know, handle the girl that was going through a lot of emotional. Uh, I've been diagnosed with ptsd. I was diagnosed with general anxiety as well. Uh, there are a few other diagnosis going around, uh, that are trying to get sorted out, but, uh, you know, some people just don't want that mental, I guess, burden of wanting to handle someone with those types of mental issues or those, those types of meaning, emotional attachment and needing someone to be reassuring to them. And it just basically made me feel lonely for a really long time. And that's, that's when I, I basically recruited myself again after so many years of trying to be social. I recruited myself again, and then when I came. To school. When I, I got into this new school, uh, I basically opened up again. I opened up again, and it's, it's basically led to me, you know, meeting you, meeting our friends. The friends that we have now, they've basically been there for me ever since What, 10th grade? Early 10th grade. And they've basically shaped me into being who I am today as well. Considering that the friend group has been basically been a very big, uh, very big bunch of ideas. As I describe it. There are a bunch of ideas because a lot of people have different opinions and different opinions can shape your own as well, so, I guess a lot of things have led to how I am today, but I'm still working on myself every single day because there's always something that we can work on ourselves every single day.

[0:34:03] Benny

Yeah, of course. Uh, of course we can always work on something and man, we just gotta keep pushing on. We gotta go through the hardships and eventually will break through them, you know? Um, I, I feel like our little friend group has been a really nice family. Like, uh, it, I really, we really feel close. Uh, really, I really feel close to all of you guys and overall I'm really happy to, to know that you're in a better place now than you were before. And, uh, hopefully, uh, that keeps improving over time. Um, but moving on, you told me about Hurricane Maria right there. A little bit more about your experience. Um, you told me, uh, about your house and being destroyed and stuff. Um, you know, that being your experiences with the hurricane. Can you describe me The house where you just, where you stayed doing this phenomenon?

[0:35:05] Paola

The house that I stayed in was actually my grandma's house. It was about a street or two from my own house. But since we had a, a very big power plant in the other house, we felt a lot safer there because we could, you know, charge our electronics. I was still starting with my respiratory problem, so I also had, uh, power for my electric therapy machine, which is something that I basically need every day so that my lungs don't collapse on themselves. We had the power at my

grandma's house, and I remember when the hurricane first was there, it was basically the same. Uh, The same outline as my own house. The only difference was that the living room and the dining room were separate because they basically shut off the garage and made the garage into the living room, and the quote on quote "living room" was the dining hall. But I remember when Hurricane Maria hit, uh, we were basically all separated into three different rooms. My uncle was also staying with us at the time. He was in a separate room. My parents and my brother were in what was supposed to be my room in my grandma's house, and I was staying with my grandparents. Uh, and I was my little air mattress on the floor sleeping as I heard the winds crashing on my parent, like my grandparents' window.

[0:36:44] Benny

Yeah, no, that, that storm was insane. Like I remember

[0:36:44] Benny

That storm was absolutely insane

[0:25:30] Benny

Yeah. No, I, I remember hearing, uh, I remember reading about this, um, in a, in like a book, in a chapter, in a book. But there was, uh, about like experiences. And I remember this person narrated that below the doors, the wind would make demonic sounds. Um, and like demonic, like weird demo demonic sounds just because of how big the air, the air, like the wind was gushing through the windows and stuff and, and, uh, through a closed door. And I remember, I, I, I kind of correlated to the, I, I, uh, how do you say this? I, I felt, uh, not closure. Damn... Um, uh, I had a similar experience myself where I heard this... kind of demonic sounds as well during this, but it more sounded to me like an elephant. And so I, Every time I think, yeah, every time I think about, Sorry.

[0:38:00] Paola

It sounds Yeah, kinda sounds like it sounded really weird cause it, it was a weird, weird whistling sound cause it, it was, it, it, it, it was, I don't even know how to spread it because the winds in Maria, if I'm, if I'm not mistaken, they were so strong, they got, I believe to 155 miles per hour. The winds, they were so and so, so, so loud. I, I, I don't even know how to describe them at this point because every time people have their own interpretation of how they sounded, they just sounded unnatural. That's how I basically just describe the wind unnatural because they really worked.

[0:25:30] Benny Paola

To me they sounded very natural because of the elephant. Get it? I'm sorry, but yeah.

[0:38:46] Paola

Okay. Yeah. Understandable.

[0:38:47] Benny

But, yeah. Um, but how do you feel during this experience?

[0:38:56] Paola

I feel extremely anxious. Yeah. Cause you never know what's gonna happen in a storm. Right. You never know if a tree suddenly decides to fall onto your house. You never know if a random, uh, wooden plank is gonna hit your car. You never know if the power is gonna completely go off unless you live here, which you definitely know it will definitely go out. Uh, you never know when it's gonna come back. You never know when the water's gonna come back. You never know if someone that you love that has been excommunicated because you know, all power lines go out, communication goes out though it's basically the anxiety of you only know the state of the people that are right next to you and not the people that you care about, but are far away.

[0:39:54] Paola

Mhmm. . Yeah. I...

[0:39:55] Paola

I remember, I remember when a lot of people after the hurricane when we went back to school, that a lot of people met each other crying and hugging because a lot of them didn't know if their friends were still okay or not, and they only knew that they were okay after they went to school.

[0:40:10] Benny

Yeah. It, it, it was actually kind of a weird experience when we came back. Um, I remember, yeah, feeling really relieved because of my friends, seeing my friends again. Um, some of them I could, I I managed to contact, but others I, I couldn't due to, you know, signal or limitations or maybe I don't, I don't, I think one of my friends even lost their phone during the storm. So overall seeing them, um, really gave me a big sigh of relief, you know, uh, that I, I, I don't think I've ever experienced before. It was something kind of, um, terrifying in a sense. Um, but in general, I, I'm happy that everybody, uh, was okay and, you know, hopefully nothing like that ever happens again. Um...

[0:41:05] Paola

Sa sadly I think so that considering how climate change is going and the fact that storms are getting a lot heavier, they're getting a lot stronger because of climate change, even though it's something that I wouldn't want to say. It's something that at the same time, I would have to admit, it's seeming very likely that we might see something like that again if we don't change the way that climate change is affecting our world.

[0:41:34] Benny Paola

Yeah. It is the sad of reality, but I, I just really do not like thinking about it man.

[0:41:38] Benny Paola

I just really do not want to think about another Maria hitting us like that.

[0:41:43] Benny

Geez. And now with the hurricane, uh, what was it called? I forgot. Uh, the last one, the, the hit us

[0:41:47] Paola

Fiona?

[0:41:48] Benny

Fiona, Yeah. Now with Fiona, like that was terrifying, especially to Florida.

[0:41:53] Paola

Yeah. It was terrifying how it's hitting Florida.

[0:41:54] Benny

Yeah, it, has it already hit?

[0:41:57] Paola

Yeah. It, if I'm not mistaken, it hit yesterday as a category four.

[0:42:02] Benny

Oh geez.

[0:42:03] Paola

Yesterday or the day before as a category four. And Fiona, after it hit us, it hit Canada hit, If I'm not mistaken, it was Winnipeg and Nova Scotia or, uh, I think just Nova Scotia. But it hit it as a category three, going to category four.

[0:42:22] Benny

Oh my gosh.

[0:42:23] Paola

It, it, it, these two have left destruction after destruction in their paths.

[0:42:29] Benny

Yeah.

[0:42:30] Paola

And I think there's another storm on its way as well.

[0:42:35] Benny

Wait really?

[0:42:36] Paola

I think there was another storm on its way as well.

[0:42:40] Benny

Hopefully not over here.

[0:42:41] Paola

Hopefully not. I, I hope not. But you might wanna get a canoe, you might just wanna get a canoe.

[0:42:50] Benny

Yeah, no, I, I saw the, the, the aftermath. On, you know, the, the, the places that were mostly affected, you know Ponce, Mayaguez and stuff and it was just depressing, man. Like everything was flooded. Uh, I saw people that also lost their houses.

[0:43:06] Paola

Everything, everything was basically completely lost cause people, it, it was, I don't remember how, how much feet it was of water, but people lost entire homes that were completely flooded to the brim with water over here. In, in, represa Carraizo they had to, uh, in the represa, uh, it's basically a dam. There are about seven compartments to release water into the regular lake system. They started up with just two compartments open, and not even three hours later, all seven water compartments of the dam were open.

[0:43:47] Benny

It's all dang, all seven. Like...

[0:43:49] Paola

Yes, all seven of them at the same time were open and letting out water rush down to the nearby river, which was something that was concerning for Loiza residents because the lake eventually would disenbark fully in Loiza, which would cause mass floodings.

[0:44:09] Benny

Geez. Yeah. No, it's like, it, it actually terrifying. Like Hurricane Maria, it was like actually like how the aftermath was, but more minimized I guess you could say. But it, it's still terrifying. Still like depressing. Um, but moving back to Maria, uh, how did you, do you remember how you felt the days leading up to it and how did you guys, like, how did you family prepare for it?

[0:44:40] Paola

Well, my family has always been extremely, uh, emergency ready. My mom was a girl scout and my dad has always been, he always lived in, in rural areas. He used to work at a... Uh, I think it was a horse training facility, something like that. He always had like really big, uh, horse dens for the horse races here in Puerto Rico so they basically lived throughout Hugo and I forget, And George, my parents lived through Hugo and George, so they basically knew like how big storms could get at the time. Cause, cause you know, Hugo and George were basically the only two that they had really experienced, but they were extremely scared of course, because Maria was basically promising Hugo and George combined times two. So my mom always has a emergency stack of food ready for if a hurricane hits or something happens and we have to stay locked in the house for quite a few days. We at least have quite a few like food, uh, energy things. We have, uh, pretty big stockpile of food. And my dad, he, I believe, invested in solar panels as well for the house. So if, for example, electricity cuts off, uh, we have the solar panel option to power the house. And he also basically made, uh, a shed so that the batteries that powered the house apart from the solar panels also could keep the, I guess, like another layer of protection for the house.

[0:46:23] Benny

Okay.

[0:46:25] Paola

But they were, they were really prepared, like they always made sure that we're as, as prepared as possible for anything involving storms.

[0:46:34] Benny

Okay. Yeah, No, that seems, uh, that's great. Uh, my parents, uh, also prepared very well. Um, I remember. Ah, dang. But I remember, I remember, Do you remember those lines for gas? But I think that was after the storm hit. , but yeah, I remember, Yeah, they were like insane, like, like four or six hours...

[0:46:54] Paola

and gas prices would suddenly spike up which everyone would always be really mad about because those gas lines were always like, they were always extremely, extremely long for absolutely no reason.

[0:47:13] Benny

Yeah, I remember doing like a... three hours. You don't like, Yeah, no, I, I remember doing like a very like, long three hour line, but I heard people were doing like eight hour lines and stuff and I was like, Dang, I'm lucky I, I didn't get to, you know, do that, I guess. But...

[0:47:33] Paola

I remember when people would compare the lines for gas prices, for the lines for church chicken. They would compare the wait times for church chicken and the gas prices. And the gas lines. It was just, it was a moment where everyone just, you just knew how long the line was cause it was, people would just say,

[0:48:02] Benny

Oh, just imagine waiting for church to go by faster.

[0:48:05] Paola

That's it. That's how we know.

[0:48:06] Benny

No, I, I still think church lines were longer and are still longer than that.

[0:48:11] Paola

Yeah, I still are, I still think longer.

[0:48:13] Benny Paola

Um, but, um, can you describe the events that transpired that day? I, I think you already went into it, but do you remember like, the morning during and like after, like right after?

[0:48:27] Benny Paola

Oh, yeah. Uh, the morning of, I remember the day, like before the, the storm actually hit. I remember just trying to get as comfortable as possible to the, like on my bed. And I remember trying to get as comfortable as possible in my little air mattress. Just to try and like have a moment where it passes and just be like, Okay, it's gonna happen eventually, but it's gonna happen. Uh, you have to be mentally ready for anything that may or may not happen in the storm and just be as calm as possible cause it's not good to have a panic attack while there's a storm happening. So I, I went to sleep and not even what, four hours later the wind started. Cause I

remember the wind started at about, I think it was like 4:00 AM when started and then everyone woke up, no one could sleep and we just stayed just sitting by the window watching as everything flew away and just hoping that nothing would, uh, basically crash the house. But I remember that we would always look at this one pole that was basically slowly creaking and slowly, slowly, slowly, like falling. And there was one point where I looked at my mom and I told her, I bet I bet you \$10, that thing is gonna fall forwards. And she said, Well, I bet that it's gonna fall backwards.

[0:50:16] Benny

What, which way did it fall?

[0:47:13] Paola

It fell forwards, I got my 10 bucks that day. It fell forwards. And to this day, that pole is still not. It is still not fixed. There is a stump where that pole used to be. It's just a commemorative stump of what happened.

[0:50:42] Benny

Dude, it's been five years. No way.

[0:50:46] Paola

It's been five years and it's, it, there's absolutely no light in that street because that was the only lamp post in the street. So that entire, like the neighbors basically had to resort to putting, uh, LED lights all over their houses just so they could see at night.

[0:51:08] Benny

Oh my god. Dang, dude, that's, that's insane to think about. That is actually insane to think about. Yeah.

[0:51:23] Paola

Literally, literally there, they, it has nothing has happened. Absolutely nothing has happened. No initiative. I mean, no, they, they did initiative, but not, you know, the actual, the government act, you know, Luma and stuff, they didn't do, haven't done anything. Um, but, Okay. And what happened? What, what did you guys do like the days after this all happened?

[0:51:50] Paola

Well, I remember that we would go absolutely crazy trying to find things like, uh, service, because I have quite a few family members that are outside, uh, in the us and while they were, they were pretty, pretty worried about our state of course. So we would try to like go down the mountain after, after a while we would try to go down the mountain and, uh, get service as much as we could, just as much as we could. But, uh, Sorry, I had to take a sip of water. .

[0:52:30] Paola

No, no worries.

[0:52:34] Paola

Uh, we had to also look for quite a few gas, uh, lines because, uh, the plant that was in our, our house, like our diesel plant at home, it was giving us some some trouble. And I remember my uncle, he would always buy these power generators so that he could basically like fix them at home. and whenever one generator would be as good as possible, the other would just break down out of nowhere. So we would have to go down again after a few days because the roads were completely like, they were completely like covered in trees cause we couldn't go down for a few days. So after all of that, we went down, we got all of the materials, we went back up to try and fix them. Did not fix them. He had to take them to somewhere else. Uh, we only went down when it was for like food or the two or three minutes of service I had. I remember I was so, like, I was so determined to try and contact my online friends whenever we would leave to try and get, uh, Cash or something from other places, because most places didn't accept a card because of the fact that there was no electricity. So it would have to be all with cash. Every time that we could go, I would tag on just so I could get some type of signal and have some type of contact with my online friends.

[0:53:15] Benny

Wow. Dang. All of that. You had to do all of that. Wow. Um, yeah. I remember. I, we went to, uh, uh, where was it? Uh, there was only one place with signal and it was like, At a Krispy Kream and like I remember we stayed there for like hours, uh, because it was, you know, the only place would like signal and like internet and stuff. And like there were, it, the whole place was just swamped with people, bro. I remember like, I think I saw someone like put a towel on the floor and like, sleep on there cause there was also air conditioning and stuff. But yeah, no, we had to do a lot for that. And no, it, like, it sucks. It sucks that we had to go, uh, go through that. Um, but, uh, how were the days, um, because I, I think you, you, you already told me, um, about your house and how it got destroyed. Um, can you tell me how you felt when you, when you discovered that? Like where, when you saw that, what happened?

[0:55:25] Paola

Oh, the funny thing about my house, uh, was that the way that I knew was because, uh, I was inside the house when it bursted in flames.

[0:55:33] Benny

Oh, oh, okay.

[0:55:36] Paola

Uh, the way that it happened was that I was, uh, about to fall asleep and my mom and my brother were getting ready to like shower for the, you know, to turn in for the night. And we basically heard a lot of ruckus going outside, happening outside because the neighbors were like bashing on our door cause we didn't know what was going on. And we, well my mom and I went basically to check on what was going on. And when we see outside, it was that the generator was already catching fire. So my mom basically yells at me to get these like, uh, these buckets of water. And my mom and I were trying really desperately to just at least lower the temperature of the gas tank. Not necessarily put it out cause we kind of knew that we couldn't put it out. So my brother basically like left the house, then my mom left the house, but I wouldn't leave the house. I basically just acted like as if it was a dream and I kind of first went back to my room. I don't know why I went back to my room. And then when I basically knew that my brother and my mom were outside the house, that was when I, I ran out of the house just in time because as I ran out of the house, my mom basically had this instinct of... the cars were basically really close to where the, the generator was. So she moved the cars so that if the fire spread, the cars wouldn't burst as well. So as I was running outside of the house, the, like, the fire basically consumed everything that was left behind me. And after I ran out the house, I ran to my grandma's house just to like, basically screaming at them that there was something wrong cause they kind of had this sort of... they had this feeling cause they described it as this feeling that something was wrong. And when they saw the, like the cloud of smoke, they didn't really know if it was my house or not. But then when they saw me running to their house and screaming and crying, uh, they basically just instantly knew that it was my house and that something was wrong and my uncle was there. So he went with my neighbor and they basically ran up to the house in their car and my dad, throughout this whole time was in Caguas cause he was working for Fema. So he had absolutely no idea that all of this was happening. He had absolutely zero idea that all of this was happening. He basically, he only knew what was happening when he got to Cupey because Caguas was absolutely without any type of signal. And when he got close to Trujillo Alto is when my neighbor called him and said, Hey, like, you better get here cause like there's something wrong with your house. And he is like, Well, it's wrong, and my neighbor said, well, it's not there anymore.

[0:58:42] Paola

Oh. Wow. Like all of it just gone?

[0:58:50] Paola

Yeah. It basically, the temperature rose so much that you could see like the, you know, the metal rods for the concrete, uh, of the house? so that you can lay the concrete, uh, skeleton of the house. Those were visible because of how hot the temperatures got.

[0:59:13] Benny

Wow.

[0:59:14] Benny Paola

And then after that, uh, the through, I, I saw fire, fire department, they didn't have water in the truck, so we had to wait until the fire department from Rio Grande got to Trujillo, to my house to put out the fire. Wow. And then the fire started on December, Friday, December 1st at 9:00 PM and it, it was put out, I think it was around 1:00 AM, so from 9:00 PM to about 12 to 1:00 AM my house was burning.

[0:59:57] Benny Paola

Geez. Dude that long. Yeah, no, I, Yeah, no, there was no trace of it. after that, for sure.

[1:00:06] Paola

I remember, I remember my house burned down riding and on Monday I was at the school, like just with the little scraps of clothes I had left. And our history teacher, uh, I believe he was there. And he like, looked at me, looked at me weird, and he's like, Are you okay? And I just looked at him like, "No, I'm not okay. I kind of, we kind of need to tell you something that happened". And he is like, Oh, okay, well explain what, what's wrong? So I explained to him, "Hey, um, I'm sorry if I don't have clothes or a notebook or a backpack, my house burned down on Friday and it's Monday, so I'm sorry if I don't have anything." And was, I remember no one believing my house had burned down until they saw all of the social media posts that were made the next day because people, uh, people had taken videos of the house burning and pictures of the house burning and they had posted them on social media.

[1:01:18] Benny

Wait, your house?

[1:01:21] Benny Paola

Yes.

[1:01:23] Benny

What?

[1:01:26] Paola

I have no idea. They just, they just saw the house was burning, taped it and posted it. That's it.

[1:01:34] Benny

I do not know how to feel about that.

[1:01:42] Paola

It's kind of weird when you see your house burning on social media.

[1:01:43] Benny

Yeah. No, I, It must be. But, um, you told me about like, experience at school. Any other experiences you had a cause to this?

[1:01:57] Paola

Uh, I remember that some of my friends that were in a grade, uh, higher than I was, They basically, like, they heard what happened and they did like a little drive where they brought boxes of things so that they could give to me after their house burned down, which had like, you know, a personal items, had clothes, had like little stuffed animals, which I still have one of them, like today I still have one of those teddy bears that they gave me today. But they were, they were like a lot of help truly to like basically ease the emotional trauma of suddenly losing my house out of nowhere after a huge hurricane.

[1:02:39] Benny

Yeah, no. And um, well what do you guys do? Like, where do you guys stay?

[1:02:42] Paola

We were staying at my grandma's house actually. And that house currently is the house that my uncle is living in right now. So the house is surprisingly still standing.

[1:02:56] Benny

Oh, okay. Well, that's good to hear.

[1:03:01] Paola

inaudible

[1:03:03] Benny

Uh, what was that? Sorry?

[1:03:03] Benny Paola

Basically, basically it got restored and my uncle is now the one living in the house.

[1:03:10] Benny

Oh, okay. Oh, okay. Um, but, uh, have things Ha uh, when did things like start turning around for you?

[1:03:23] Paola

Uh, I think easily, uh... I'd say, hmm... mid 2018.

[1:03:37] Benny Paola

Okay. So like a, like almost a year after the hurricane.

[1:02:56] Paola

Well...

[1:03:49] Benny

Wait, the hurricane, was it 2017, right? Yeah

[1:03:52] Paola

Yeah. Hurricane was 2017. No, sorry, mid 2019, I believe it was.

[1:04:03] Benny

Oh, okay.

[1:04:05] Paola

Mid 2019 was when things started to get a bit easier.

[1:04:07] Benny

Uh, what, like, what things happened? What happened

[1:04:10] Paola

Mid 2019 were moments where basically it was like, it was end of 10th grade. I was still, I was still trying to figure out who I was in terms of, you know, self identity in terms of, uh, things getting better at, at, with my home situation. Considering I had moved into my new house, uh, I had just gotten out of a pretty tumultuous and toxic relationship, but had started another one, which is the one that I still have currently three years later, which has been my longest and my healthiest relationship. Uh, I also had basically, I guess for certain, like defined what I wanted to do with my life and defined the things that I wanted to become, the person that I wanted to become and the things that I wanted to do with my life as well. It was, it was a year of a lot of realization. It was a year of a lot of personal growth. It was basically our, also our most stable year because, uh, I, I think at 10th grade, basically for us was our most stable year since during ninth grade we had the hurricane 10th grade. I think the only thing that was kind of icky, if he was in January where it was like the, the earthquakes and then, you know, 11th and 12th grade, we basically were in a pandemic. So it was basically like our most stable year out of all of them.

[1:06:00] Benny

Yeah. And I do remember that being my favorite year because of the stableness, because nothing out abnormal happened.

[1:06:11] Paola

I think it was, It's a lot of people's, like, at least in in our class, class of 2021, I think our collective 10th grade year for a lot of people was just the best year overall since it was, I guess it was a year of a lot of change cause it was, I guess that that one awkward moment in high school where you're not really, you're not a freshman, but you're not almost done and you're not also not done, but you're not starting as well. It's like that one awkward year, but at the same time it was, it was where a lot of us could just feel relaxed. I believe it was also a lot of people considered to be the one where it was the most, like, uh, the one where the professors were a lot more calm as

well. Cause it wasn't with that, with that entire thing of, okay, there's a lot of things happening, there's a lot of world situations happening. We have to do a lot of things quickly now. It was a year where professors just took things calmly because no one thought that something bad was gonna happen tomorrow.

[1:07:20] Benny

Yeah. It, it, it was, it actually did feel like that. I, I do agree. But how do you, how are you and your family members now after everything that's happened?

[1:07:35] Paola

After everything, well, of course my, my family still affected by what happened still today considering, Well, you know, it's, it's a, it's an emotional scar. It's an emotional trauma that people can't easily erase. Uh, I guess it was one of the reasons why my, my parents opted to investing in solar panels instead of investing on a generator system for just in case something happens. Uh, my brother and my mom as well have the same PTSD that I do considering what happened, but it's things that we've been slowly working on. My brother is also deciding on what he wants to study now, so that's also really good that he's going basically through the same situation that I did where 10th grade is for now, his most stable year.

[1:08:32] Benny

I mean, well stable ish I guess, because, you know, we...

[1:08:36] Paola

We're still in a pandemic, but not as bad as earlier, at least.

[1:08:42] Benny

Yeah, and the hurricane as well.

[1:08:46] Paola

And the hurricane. Geez. I, I don't know what, I have a feeling his next couple years are not gonna be chill.

[1:08:32] Paola

That stable. Not considering, considering what Russia just said, I would not be surprised,

[1:09:03] Benny

man. I just, I just, I just wanna live a peaceful life, you know? Is that all? Is that too much?

[1:09:07] Paola

You have a peaceful life please. Can we have a singular peaceful year? Just one. Just one.

[1:09:13] Benny

Just one.

[1:09:17] Paola

Ever since 2017 forward there has not been a peaceful year. Nope.

[1:09:23] Benny

Not at all. And man, I just, I eventually we'll get one. Don't worry. I, I have faith. That might be like a couple 20 years from now, but eventually, you know, But yeah...

[1:09:42] Paola

I mean, better late than never, I guess.

[1:09:46] Benny

That is true. That is true. Yeah. But anyways, um, I wanted to thank you for your time. Um, I, I, I, I've really enjoyed, uh, the conversation we've had here. Thank you for telling me about your experiences and, and everything else that you've told me.

[1:10:03] Paola

Absolutely.

[1:10:04] Benny

Yeah. No, thank you. I, I, I really do deeply appreciate. Uh, like on our personal note, like really, I thank you for taking your time off and doing this with me,

[1:10:16 Paola

Absolutely. Don't worry. It's been a pleasure.

[1:10:21] Benny

Thank you. Thank you. Um, but yeah, uh, hopefully you have a, a nice evening. Right now it's 5:35 where we're ending this 5:35 PM on September 30th, 2022, and goodbye.