Oral history interview with Alexandra Erazo Ramos, November 19, 2023

ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Alexandra S. Erazo Ramos conducted by Nehemías Toro Padrón on November 19, 2023. This interview is part of coursework 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.

Nehemías Toro Padrón

Prof. Marci Denisiuk

INGL 3238

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Transcript for Oral History Interview

Interviewer: NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN

Interviewee: ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS

Date: November 19th, 2023

Time: 10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.

Transcript:

This transcript corresponds to an interview conducted as part of an oral history project that is part of the Creative Writing Course INGL3238. This interview was conducted online through Google Meet.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [00:00]: Okay, so we're recording now. First of all, thank you so much for being here. I had mentioned before just now the point of this is it's an oral history project interview, so yeah, just know that there's no requirement for us to fill. I have a series of questions that are our general plan, but we don't have to touch all those points. It's basically…the idea is that we can go whatever direction the interview leads us to so, yeah, if you feel like you don't need to add anything, that you don't want to reply to any of the questions I'm gonna ask, just let me know, it's completely fine. And the expected time of the

interview is of around 30 to 40 minutes. and yeah, just let me know if you ever need a break, okay?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [1:11]: Perfect.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [1:12]: So, to start, could you give us the generals? What's your name? How old are you?....

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [1:22]]: Okay, my name is Alexandra Sofia Erazo Ramos. I am currently 23 years old and from Lajas, Puerto Rico. I recently graduated from the University of Puerto Rico of Mayagüez…of Biology, and right now I've been working.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [1:46]: Okay. What are your pronouns? Just for the record.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [1:56]: My pronouns are she/her.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [1:58]: Okay, and thanks for all that. Okay. Sorry. I'm a little nervous. Before we continue. Could I ask what are you working in?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [2:16]: Oh yeah, I'm working with my father. He has a company where he offers some services to local restaurants and basically just better themselves and have a better opportunity in the market.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [2:32]: Okay, that's great. What did you graduate from in the University?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [2:36]: Biology

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [2:38]: Great to know. Okay, so just to start the more anecdotal part. Can you tell us a little bit about the Center for University Access and what your experience has been with working there?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [2:59]: Okay, should I start like how I got in and then…?

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [3:02]: If you want to start…it's really up to you. I guess it would be a little bit easier if you start explaining what the project is and then be like “I got there through x or y means”.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [3:17]: Okay, so the CUA is a project for underrepresented and poor communities in the town of mayaguez and they offer services for high school and middle school students in order to achieve a higher probability and being able to enter any University, not just only the UPR system, and basically they offer services of tutoring, which is where I excel more, they also had a camp and they also give mentoring not only for the entrance exams of the University and also they're like what to do when they finish High School.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [4:13]: Thanks for letting us know that and how was your experience? How did you first start working at the club?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [4:23]: Okay, I started working when randomly my mentor of investigation Dr. Tania Lopez Marrero, she contacted me, I was in Walgreens, she contacted me and she said “I need to talk to you right now. I have an opportunity for you and I would like to know if you're interested but you have to tell me right now” and I'm like “Okay, sure tell me more what’s it about?” She gives me some links pertaining what it is to be en el CUA, which was the Facebook link and I said, “Okay, yeah, I'm interested.” and she immediately called Jocelyn… Dr. Jocelyn and I literally had my interview with her the same day and I talked to her before that and I was literally in McDonald's. So fast, it was like “pan pan pan” so that's how I knew about it. And, since then, I absolutely loved my experience in the CUA. It has made me learn not only from being part of that demographic, but it's made me be more aware in how yes, the disparities are actually very obvious. The thing is when you're the minority, sometimes you just brush it off and be like, “okay, that's normal for us”, but it's not, because when you start actually seeing that we don't have the same opportunities as others, that's when you actually open your eyes and wow there actually is a disadvantage in what we do. So CUA has really opened my eyes to that and now I try to advocate for social justice for underrepresented communities.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [6:30]: Okay, that's amazing. is there any particular moment where you think it kind of clicked in your brain that the disparity is very noticeable. is there any moment where you feel like it became evident? While working at the CUA or whenever…

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [6:52]: When Jocelyn and Sandra did the presentation about, well they basically showed the statistics of Mayagüez and the community, I did not notice that it was so drastic. That such a high percentage of kids was in that block of minority, which is a lot of people and also that it also made me check out then my hometown which is Lajas and it's basically the same thing so it made me notice that not everybody's actually on the same boat. But as where I'm from, it's like everybody's in the same boat. I think it's common which is really actually not.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [7:50]: Okay. Yeah, I see what you mean. So, you mentioned before about working as a tutor in CUA, is there any…what other roles did you perform during your time working there?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [8:09]: Okay. In the CUA I worked as a tutor, I also worked giving some mentorship and what to do after college. I've also worked as being the person who's doing the inventory for snacks and I also was the person who was in charge of any caterings that had to happen. I know I was also in charge of making sure that everything was going to plan when Dr. Jocelyn or Dr. Sandra wasn't there.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [8:56]: Okay, do you feel like your experience of having been a part of the target demographic of the CUA at some point made you, I don't know, made you take particular care in some of these tasks or made you take a different approach when giving mentorship or tutoring.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [9:22]: Could you repeat that again?

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [9:23]: Of course!

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [9:25]: I'm sorry.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [9:27]: Don't worry about it.

Do you feel like your experience of having studied in the public education system helped you or made you take particular care in your tasks or did it impact what you did?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [9:52]: It definitely did, it made me… I understood how the system worked and so every single time I had to do an assignment with a student. "Let's first look for all the information there is so that at least if we don't finish it, at least have the information in order to continue the assignment and help you be able to actually do it for yourself", because we don't have that much time in the CUA.

Basically, we have one hour and thirty minutes and that time flies back really fast. So that was like my major priority because when you don't have access to a stable internet or you don't know how to look for information, because that is also some of the cases, they don't know how to look for information. So my care was pertained to get all the information you need and try to make you understand how you can continue on with the project without me being physically there.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [11:05]: Wow, that's actually a great answer! Thank you. I'm a little nervous. Hey, okay. so then… Okay. so do you feel like the CUA, in general, has an impact on its target demographic? Do you feel like you've seen growth in the students that you've worked with?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [11:39]: Definitely, definitely, at the beginning they come a little bit like…not any energy they don't really want to do any work, but, thanks to the way that the tutors in the CUA have…. the approach they take when to do the assignments, I've noticed that it makes the students actually come energized like: "Oh my God, we have to do this, we have to do that and I also have to do this, so with what should we start?" and they're actually motivated because they know they're gonna be able to do the work and as it's a lot it's like, okay, let's go and it really helps seeing the motivation then knowing when they come really excited because they tell me "My God, I got this in the quiz" or "I got this in the exam or I got this in the assignment" they get so happy because they have a good grade and it's one of the main reasons why working in the CUA has been so precious to me. Just seeing them being happy because they have a good grade from all the help that we have given them.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [12:50]: That's great! What classes did you normally tutor in?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [12:57]: Okay, I normally tutored in science and math.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [13:03]: Okay, so connecting that to your question… to the previous question, do you feel specifically in science and math that you see an improvement as students throughout the year did the amount of knowledge they have about the classes

surprise you in whichever direction good or bad? and do you feel like there was growth specifically in learning in those areas?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [13:31]: Specifically in science, as I like to think it's a fun subject, I at least can make the assignment fund for them. And I think it's a lot more easier for them to understand as it's like information that they can. How do you say *digerir?*

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [13:59]: Yeah, digest.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [14:00]: That they can digest and it's not… like it could be boring, but you try to make it not boring. Now in math, which is lot more challenging subject, I've noticed that, at least, when the process of how to do the equation clicks in their head they automatically get it. And then, they want to do more because they know what to do now because the thing with math is if you don't know what you're doing you get frustrated because "What am I supposed to do now?" But at the moment that it clicks in your brain and you just know "this is what I was supposed to do" that means you just know the process because math is just a process of elimination and it has helped them in, better grasp on what to do and I have seen the improvement at least in that stuff, even the most serious ones.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [15:11]: Okay, that's great. And what do you think… do you feel like the students also grow emotionally throughout their time in the CUA? Do you feel like having studied these things and going through the complex processes of getting to understand math and getting to have people that are dedicated to helping them and providing them with tutoring and these services… do you think that that has helped them grow as people too?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [15:44]: I have seen that I has grown because we give them back their confidence in the subjects, and I think that that is one of the most important stuff that we do just bring the back their confidence. Because when somebody's unmotivated and doesn't think they have the potential to do the wor, they don't try, because they already think they're a failure. But if we give them the confidence like "No you didn't understand the first time. Don't worry! Most people don't understand stuff for the first time, but you just have to continue and I'm gonna be there as a source to help you better understand the material in order for you to gain that confidence and when you're alone or when you're with your friends at the classroom, what you're doing so you can better understand and actually have a better experience in the classroom."

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [16:42]: Okay, that's great, along those lines, do you feel like working in the CUA impacted the way you view at the education system or the education in general how its value and Society.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [16:58]: It has shown me that…We've heard this so many times that education is important but it's the reason why it's important because education is not just being smart. it actually shows you values and your morals and it shapes the person did you know this about the cells? It's not only about that because education makes

you… it tries to teach you how to be a better human being and how to be able to socialize and be in a group of people in a manner that everybody feels comfortable. So it's not only for you just to gain knowledge. It's the whole experience of what it is to be a human being.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [17:59]: Wow, that's great Insight. Okay, so in this process, you must have also seen certain specific challenges, I would like to ask you about them. If you experience challenges as a tutor working in the CUA and if you like solo challenges to also the movement of educational Justice overall.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [18:33]: Some of the challenges I faced… it's basically in the beginning when we're doing recruitment, when we're trying to bring all those kids with us, right, the process of recruiting them and talking to their parents. It's difficult when they don't want to cooperate we're trying to do our best we try to offer everything we can: the transportation the food, but ultimately if the parent doesn't want their kid to go or any reason it really limits in what our goal is to is and I think that is the most difficult part trying to make things like continue coming to look what because it's not only recruiting them. It's all making them stay the whole semester so I've learned a lot from that. But yeah, that is definitely the most difficult part in being the CUA and trying to give the services of the CUA. It's the retention.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [19:46]: Okay, so in terms of retention are there specific…What do you think are the big factors that make retention such a difficult thing for the specific demographic?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [20:07]: For the specific demographic one of the things that makes it difficult is if they don't have a solid group of friends participating also in the CUA they're less likely to want to go, and also another part is that basically with them until it's night out, because now I know it's night out when they go back to their houses. It makes thom not want to go because then they know they have other stuff to do that there's still school work because we don't have the time to do everything and one hour and a half. It makes them think: “No, I'm better off at my house doing it myself” when we all know that when you say your house, you're not actually gonna do anything of school until night time. Basically that and also the part where students don't want to come because they don't want to accept the help.: for whatever reason it is, right, because there's a lot of factors so to me as an ex-tutor from the CUA trying to pass through that path with them and trying to motivate them to stay. It does take a lot, but we try to do our best.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [21:54]: Okay, And so what ways do you think working in the CUA has made you? What ways do you think working in the CUA made… what I mean is: how has it made you see the public education system? What do you think about it, its effectiveness? What are the things that could be done to improve how it's working right now?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [22:31]: The public education system has always been flawed. The fact that a program like this exists demonstrates that there are flaws in the system and being able to help out the students in ways thatt the public education system of Puerto

Rico…. It's basically give them the tools to be able to… My God! I forgot the word I was going to use.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [23:16]: That's okay. You can take your time.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [23:21]: Basically to pass over the obstacle. That wasn't what I wanted to say but it gives the same effect I think.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [22:35]]: Okay.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [22:36]: Give me a second I wanted to say more, but right now I'm blank.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [22:38]: That's okay. That's completely fine. You can take your time. And if you want to add it in later, at the end of the interview. I will be asking you if you want to add anything so you can mention it then at any point or if you remember suddenly you can just go like "This is what I wanted to say". Don't worry about it…

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [24:00]: Okay.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [24:01]: So, okay. Do you think that working in the CUA has made you feel about seeing the University of Puerto Rico as a place where these types of social justice initiatives exist, does it make you hopeful for them to grow or do you think they are way too many challenges in the way right now in terms of funding, administration, etcetera?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [24:38]: It makes me very hopeful because soon as most students who are in the public system most of the students that are from them. They're mostly from the area and having these social justice initiatives from the University and outside also it helps to try to make a happy medium between the disparities and I have seen a lot of initiatives. The thing is that I've also noticed… they haven't actually pertained to, I think, the communities that need the most help they just go to the same ones that have already received aid and most of them has to come I think because they also need the teachers. They need teachers to approach them or they approach teachers and they're not all from different schools or the teachers don't actually want to participate in the project. So it really limits on who is able to access these projects because I know there's a lot, I've seen them, for one of then I had to research what were the social justice projects get that the university had and when I saw them, I only remember participating in one. Even though I'm from the area, you know, Lajas is very close to Mayagüez and only being able to participate in one, like, in the past we couldn't even go to university, to the open house. We didn't have the access to do that. I think now they've done it because they have been trying to do a bigger approach.They need students in the University. So now they've been going to every single high school, in the past. it's just wasn't like that. So the only way we could know, I mean, I went to the university without having ever gone to the university. I'm just like "Yeah, I'm gonna go there because"- I'm gonna be honest.- "It's my only option, it's the closest one and it's the one I can afford". So it's those types of things that show me like, yes, I've seen the initiative. Yes, there's a lot of projects. I'm happy with what's up with what's been going on, but there's still a lot to improve.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [27:35]: Okay, did you know of any other type of outreach initiatives or about the CUA itself before you started working there?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [27:43]: Yes, yes. I know there's *Wheels On Science*? I don't know their names but yes, I've heard of some initiatives I participated in two, one was a an…I'm gonna say it's a seminar. I'm not sure what it was and another one. yeah. I don't know the name, but it was like physics? It starts, okay. It's called rest if you want to restrict and another one was a chemistry one. I think that's *Wheels on Science*. It's something like that where we had to do an investigation and try to grow some crystals. But those are at least the ones that I have complete knowledge of I know now. There's also *Portico* that my brother's a part of so that's how I know it exists and yes, those are the ones that I knew without having to do the research.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [28:47]: Okay, that's great… Sorry, I'm trying to think of a question on the spot because we've deviated a little bit from the script, well, not a little bit quite a bit.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [29:03]: Yeah, sorry.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [29:04]: No, no. Like I said that's part of this process. you don't have to apologize for it. It's…I'm glad that we're not, going just like me asking randomly a list of questions and just systematically answering. I'm just taking a moment to think of the questions on the spot. So that's why sometimes I take a moment before… yeah.

You mentioned that they are reaching specifically in the areas of science and physics. Do you think that that, maybe, can be complicated in terms of as it's done necessarily a broad scope of possibilities in terms of what is being presented? Those are the main ones that you could identify without, having looking for them specifically. Do you think that there is a necessity for broader scope outreach initiatives, that the focus of the study is on social sciences or other natural sciences or humanities?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [30:30]: Most definitely, I think one of the main problems the university has they just focus on engineering and Sciences and only very specific sciences. And the thing is they also have the College of Agriculture Sciences. that I know they now have some Outreach programs but in the past I at least didn't know about it and the university is not just science and engineering like there is, how do you say *Administración de Empresas* there's also, right, the parts of Humanity's and arts and you don't see them trying to advocate students to go to those programs their main focus just to get students admit it in engineering, but mostly because most of the Outreach programs are actually for engineering they're not actually for other Sciences. but even though there's a little bit but the most is for engineering. So yes, I do think there is a disparity and they should also be focused because not everything is just how we should invent this. We also need to see who is going to impact and how is this going to progress in the future, is it going to become a limitation or is it gonna further help the community?

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [32:09]: I agree. Do you feel like the CUA is incorporating that broader scope in its outreach and in how it approaches students and in the different activities it organizes.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [32:28]: It has at least for the camps and the *sabatinas* [saturday activities]. The coordinators, Dr. Jocelyn and Dr. Sandra are professors from those departments. So they know in firsthand experience what it is to not have a focus on those areas and also a good half or more of tutors are also from those apartments. So yes, they have pertained not only is it just to teach you of, what it is? of the sciences and…engineering. It's mostly just showing what the university has to offer and what life has to offer.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [33:21]: That's excellent. Thank you for shining a light on that.

I'm going into the latter portion of the questions at this point. We are nearing the end, so I want to ask you: do you feel like if you as a student had received aid from the CUA,mentoring, tutorin, etcetera… do you feel like you would have benefited from that?

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [34:03]: I definitely would. One of the main reasons I was able to obtain a good score *en las pruebas META* [the META tests] and also in the College Board is because I received tutoring from my local high school, that my teacher would give us. that is one of the reasons why I can actually be able to go there because when you're trying to study about very difficult topics like it is per calculus because that it was one of the subjects I needed most helping. This is not something I can ask help for my mother or my father because these are not courses they ever took so it mostly dependent on me and it's not something that I could just ask my mother. can we pay for tutor to give me some help in this or I couldn't even Go to the internet to Figure out how I'm supposed to do it because in those times I didn't even have internet right if I wanted to use it. I had to go then to *la plaza* and use the free internet that my town would give. So If I had the opportunity to be in a space where there's a lot of students who are actually actively in the subject or they are studying those as their majors and they know what they're trying to teach us and not only the lessons they give us not only just for the material but also what to do after high school, would have really benefited me in choosing what mayor I would have gone with. I started in pre-med, but then I changed to biology because I noticed that even though I wanted to take it, I thought the only options I had as an occupation was to be a scientist and a doctor or an engineer. I didn't know there was a lot more other opportunities. And that's something that the CUA gets, that you can like…There's a lot of professions in this world. We just don't have the knowledge about them we just know the basics because that's what it's particularly shown in the media.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [36:43]: Thank you very much for that. so we're basically at the end of the interview. I just want to give you the space to first of all, thank you so much for participating. Once again, I appreciate it a lot and I wanted to give you the space to add any comments that you want to if there's anything you would like to add or any particular common anything really? Floors open if you want to say anything.

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [37:13]: Okay, the CUA is such a very beautiful initiative that has been happening for 15 years.

I am so grateful and happy that something like that exists and that the initial professors who created the CUA noticed there was disparity and the involvement of students from the public system and the private one. And because it makes the problem be something that can be funded, so the very existence of it I'm very grateful for it and how it is occurring right now. it's such a beautiful experience. So anybody who would love to participate in something like that, I would highly encourage them to be in an outreach program that gives those type of services. You don't actually have to go only to the CUA because there's a lot more and you truly do learn a lot. Not only you just grow. personally and professionally, but you always take something with you. And those I think are the most vital parts of what it is to be human being. It's just taking bits and pieces of what you do throughout your lifetime.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRON [38:49]: Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure interviewing you. Yeah. Of course,…

ALEXANDRA S. ERAZO-RAMOS [38:55]: Thank you so much.

NEHEMIAS TORO-PADRÓN [39:00]: Thank you!...Well, I'll let you go on with your day *Muchísimas gracias* [Thank you very much]. I'm gonna stop the recording now.

Interview duration: 00:39:14