Interview with

ARACELI VELASQUEZ

Estánfor: Our Voices Oral History Project
conducted by Emma Frothingham

March 22, 2019
Introduction

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Project Description
Estánfor: Our Voices

Recorded as part of the 2019 Latino Alumni Summit, these interviews explored the lives of Latino students at Stanford from the 1970s through the 2000s. Interviewees were asked to reflect on how they came to Stanford, the experience of Latino students during their time here, challenges they faced, and what Stanford has meant to them. In conclusion, interviewees were asked to give advice to current and future Latino students at Stanford.

Guiding questions for the interviews were written by members of the Stanford Latino Alumni Association and the planners of the 2019 Latino Alumni Summit. The planning committee was chaired by Angelique Flores ‘99, Ana Moreno VanDiver ‘97, and Daniel Reyes ‘02.

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Abstract

Araceli Velasquez graduated from Stanford in 1999 with a BA in biological sciences and a minor in Spanish. In this oral history, she briefly describes her family history and how being admitted to a GATE school in the third grade impacted the rest of her life. Velasquez mentions her participation in numerous student organizations like Ballet Folklórico, Mariachi Cardenal, CHE (Chicanos in Health Education), SSCLES (Stanford Society of Chicano and Latino Engineers and Scientists), and Barrio Assistance. As a premed student, she also explains how she fought to establish a Spanish class for those in her field. Velasquez provides some insight into Stanford’s Latinx community at the time and what it meant to her and her family to earn a college degree. She concludes by talking about what drove her to earn an MBA at Fresno State and her experience as a young single mom.
Frothingham: Today is March 22, 2019. This is Emma Frothingham. I’m here at the Stanford Latino Alumni Summit, and I’m interviewing:

Velasquez: Araceli Velasquez.

Frothingham: What class are you?

Velasquez: Class of 1999.

Frothingham: 1999. So where are you originally from?

Velasquez: I’m originally from Fresno, California, in the Central Valley.

Frothingham: So you didn’t have to come that far to come to Stanford.

Velasquez: No, although it did seem pretty far for my family. My freshman year, they were literally here every weekend. [laughs] I just grew up in a really super close household. My parents came up literally every weekend, and then I would go home to Fresno sometimes. They would take me home if I didn’t have too much homework. It was about a three-and-a-half-hour drive, so roundtrip it’s like seven hours. It did seem like it was kind of far, but I know people come all over the world. So I guess relatively, no, not very far.
Frothingham: [00:01:01] But it can feel far still. Tell me about your parents, since you said that you were very close-knit and they came down to Stanford all the time. Where were they from? Did they go to college?

Velasquez: Oh, sure. My father, Guadalupe Velasquez, he was born in Texas and came to the Central Valley as a fieldworker when he was young with his parents. They emigrated from Texas to California—to Sanger. He didn’t go to college; but super, super intelligent, I think far more intelligent than I am. But unfortunately he worked in the fields. He did go to trade school, so he became a welder.

My mother was born in Fresnillo in Mexico—Fresnillo, Zacatecas—and she came to the US with her family. Her father was a bracero. He helped build the railroads in California. So he got green cards for all his children, and so my mom immigrated when she was nine.

Frothingham: [00:02:06] I know a little about the bracero program, but what was your mother’s experience, and what were her impressions of that program as a child?

Velasquez: Both my parents seemed to have really challenging childhoods where they never had enough to eat. They slept on the floor, oftentimes on dirt floors. My grandfather, after the bracero program, he worked in the fields. When he was in Mexico, he was actually an electrician. He actually went to school and everything for that. But because of the language barrier and everything, I think—so both my parents actually come from really big families.

My mom, she is one of twelve. My father is one of ten. So it was just really hard. I think both of them growing up, they just always were in a
family that struggled, but definitely a lot of love and faith. My family is Roman Catholic.

[00:03:08] Even I consider myself very spiritual, I don’t necessarily always go to church on Sunday every Sunday, but it’s definitely a big part of that heritage where you get through those tough times when you don’t have enough for your family or for your loved ones just by sticking together and faith.

**Frothingham:** When did you first hear about Stanford?

**Velasquez:** I actually heard about Stanford when I started getting packages in the mail from colleges. I was really fortunate. I grew up in a neighborhood in Fresno that I guess it’s a high-crime neighborhood.

[00:03:51] My third-grade teacher sent me for GATE testing, and so I got to go to a special GATE school in Fresno--Manchester GATE. It’s a magnet school. Then I went to a junior high that was also a GATE program and then got to go to a good high school. I think because of that, I got to be exposed to higher education, where I think a lot of the neighbor kids in my neighborhood, none of them--I’m still friends with many of them. My parents still live in the house, but they didn’t go to college. It’s just a really different experience. I think I was really fortunate to have had the opportunity that I had. If I hadn’t been tested in third grade, I think the trajectory of my life would have been very different.

**Frothingham:** Was your high school and your junior high school in your neighborhood or did you have to travel?

**Velasquez:** No. After third grade, I was always on a bus going across town.
**Frothingham:** What was your high school experience like?

**Velasquez:** [00:04:59] It was great. I think that it was a pretty diverse high school. I went to Clovis West High School. It’s in north Fresno. I think it was pretty diverse, but predominantly Caucasian and Asian-American, whereas the high school in my neighborhood with my parents it’s African-American and Mexican-American. So it definitely looked very, very different, but I still think my high school was pretty diverse, and I had a really positive experience there.

**Frothingham:** That’s good. So when you applied to Stanford, were your parents really encouraging of you going to college?

**Velasquez:** They were. It’s just they didn’t know very much about it. I actually didn’t know what an undergraduate degree was until I was a freshman here. So I didn’t know really what an undergraduate degree was or a master’s degree or doctoral. I didn’t know any of that.

**Frothingham:** [00:06:01] Tell me about your first day on the Stanford campus.

**Velasquez:** I was really excited, but also scared. I’d never traveled or was away from my family, and so I think it was just kind of hard to be away from my parents and my siblings and my extended family, because we’re all really, really close. My grandmother and all my aunts and uncles, we pretty much see everybody almost every day. I did feel very alone, even though I was surrounded by a bunch of people that I’m sure felt [laughs] very similar to me where they’re leaving their families as well.

I was excited, but just scared. Also, I just felt so incredibly blessed and lucky to have been selected to come to Stanford. I think that just being
here just made it really real for me on that first day.

[00:07:03] Then of course I think the doubt starts to sink in like, “Did they make a mistake? Do I really belong here with all these people?” Because that first day you get to interact with other people in your dorm or other people--the freshmen come early, and it’s all freshmen. Then you hear about people and what their interests are and what they have done, and you’re just like, “Oh my gosh, I’m not like that.” I think you start to doubt yourself a little bit. But that faith I think kicks in where you’re like, “No, I can,” that faith and determination.

**Frothingham:** You mentioned meeting all your dorm-mates. Where did you live on campus your freshman year?

**Velasquez:** I lived in Larkin, which is an all-frosh dorm.

**Frothingham:** Do you have any memorable experiences living in that dorm?

**Velasquez:** Oh, I think the whole year was incredible. Our dorm did a lot of activities together. I think all of us just being out talking in the hallway until one in the morning, two in the morning, and just working together on problem sets and eating together in the dining hall, we just had a lot of fun. I think all of it was really memorable.

**Frothingham:** What was your friend group at Stanford like? Did you gravitate toward the people in your dorm or your classes? Where did you find your group of people?

**Velasquez:** I think I’m pretty outgoing. I was friends with pretty much everyone in my dorm and then also a lot of friends in my classes, and so we would have study groups, and then also friends from El Centro Chicano. I did spend
some time there, too, because some of the groups that I volunteered with were housed there, and so to attend meetings and work on projects I would spend time there.

Frothingham: Can you talk a little bit more about El Centro Chicano?

Velasquez: [00:09:01] Yes. I think it was really a comfortable place to be where it’s always open at all hours, whereas some of the libraries would close at midnight. I know when I was here, there was the twenty-four-hour study room in Meyer, I think one of the libraries. I can’t remember. But it’s not there anymore. I walk by, and the building’s gone. [laughs]

But El Centro is always open. So if you really had to get something done and you wanted to be around other people, it was the right place to be, even at one or two in the morning--and the little computer lab in there.

Also because I feel like in the dorm where I lived, especially when I took computer science, all the computers were always taken--always, in my dorm. And I just was like, “I need to do some work.” So I think it was nice to have another place to work.

Frothingham: [00:10:04] Yes, of course. What did you end up majoring in?

Velasquez: I majored in biological sciences.

Frothingham: How long did it take you to pick your major, and how did you come to the decision of what you were going to major in?

Velasquez: I actually wanted to major in biology coming in. AP Bio was my favorite class in high school, and I just have always really loved science and living things. So I decided my major right away. But I actually was considering double majoring because I really liked industrial engineering, too. I don’t
think they have an IE major here anymore. But I was trying to do both.

I think the thing with me is when I have a hard time deciding something, I’m just like, “Oh, I’ll just do it all.” But then I spread myself too thin, and I would be taking like twenty units a quarter and really killing myself. So I dropped industrial engineering and just stuck to bio; and then I got a minor in Spanish.

Frothingham: [00:11:06] Do you have any really memorable courses that you took in biology or Spanish or anywhere at Stanford? What professors taught them, and which professors were really inspiring to you?

Velasquez: Oh, sure. Well, I think with the biology classes, a lot of them were really big, and so they weren’t as memorable as maybe—I really loved my Spanish classes. Actually, I designed my own class, too, because they didn’t have a Spanish for pre-meds. I was pre-med when I was here, and they didn’t have Spanish for pre-meds.

So I actually went to the department and talked with them about starting a class—they actually let me put together the syllabus and choose the instructor, which was Ana Maria Sierra. So then that class got started, because they did have one for medical students, but they wouldn’t let undergraduates into that because it was always full of medical students, even though they said, “Oh, it’s open to undergrads.”

[00:12:09] I remember I went two quarters in a row and got booted out because she was like, “Sorry, there’s no—” She was actually really rude. I think she was one of the co-chairs of the Spanish Department. I can’t remember her name. But it was that kind of impetus where I was like, “This
is ridiculous. If I want to learn medical terminology, I should be able to do that, and it shouldn’t just be medical students. What about us? Because we’re volunteering in the clinics, too, and having to interact with patients.” I got to do that, so I think that was a memorable experience for me.

**Frothingham:** Do you know if they still teach that course?

**Velasquez:** I believe so, yes. The last time I checked, it’s still going.

**Frothingham:** And so was it just a one-quarter course that you took?

**Velasquez:** [00:12:49] No, it was actually two. I think it was beginning and intermediate. So we were able to do two classes, because the undergrads that signed up—because I also had to get people to sign up for the class in order for the university to approve it. And then the people that were in the class with me, they really were excited by it and wanted to learn more, and so we got to extend it to a second quarter.

**Frothingham:** This might be a silly question. What is your favorite medical term in Spanish then?

**Velasquez:** Probably corazón, heart. [laughs]

**Frothingham:** It’s a nice term. It’s such a pretty word, too. So you talked a little about El Centro Chicano. Were there any other student groups that you were involved in on campus while you were here?

**Velasquez:** Yes, there were a lot. I’m trying to think. I’ll just think of each year and then the things I was involved in. Freshman year I was in Ballet Folklórico, which is the cultural dancing and then I also played my violin in Mariachi Cardenal.

[00:14:04] I joined CHE, which is Chicanos in Health Education. I don’t know if that’s still around. I was also a member of SSCLES, the
Stanford Society of Chicano and Latino Engineers and Scientists. I volunteered in Barrio Assistance, which is volunteering in East Palo Alto. Let’s see, I think that’s it.

Frothingham: Do you have any memorable experiences from any of those groups?

Velasquez: Oh, yes, definitely all of them. I think some of the memories that I cherish the most were when I volunteered for Barrio Assistance because you could have the same child. I started with a third-grader named Jorge and when I first met him, he was really shy, very timid, and didn’t want to really talk, really low confidence. I was told that he was having trouble learning to read in school.

[00:15:01] So what I did is I worked with him on--we created our own books. He’s actually a really great artist. It was just really amazing to see the metamorphosis in my interactions with him, just really building up his confidence and believing that he could do anything and that he was really creative and he was a great writer and also a great reader, and just seeing him evolve. I had him for two years and then also focused on math and other subjects with him. I think for me that was really memorable, just to be able to have a positive impact on a child. I think it’s really important for children to be able to have someone that they can identify with, because I shared with him that I struggled with things, too, when I was his age.

[00:15:59] Just being able to relate and say, “But look, I am here in college. You can go to college, too,” and just having that connection where it’s like, “You and I are alike. You can do this. I had the same struggles you did.” For me, I think that was really memorable.
Frothingham: Did you have any particular challenges that really hit you while you were at Stanford?

Velasquez: Definitely.

Frothingham: How did you overcome them?

Velasquez: So even though I went to a good high school, it was public. Every school that I attended was public, pretty much, but it was a good public high school. I never wrote an essay longer than like four pages in my high school. Coming here, where you’re having to write like twenty-page research papers--and I’d never really written a research paper, either. For me, that was really a big struggle.

[00:16:58] And I think also just the vocabulary, too. Spanish is my first language. I didn’t learn English until I was like four. No one in my family is college-educated. I think the language that I had coming into the university was, I don’t know, [laughs] not as broad as other students. I think that really comes out when you’re writing, just the ability to express yourself. But I think that being here really broadened my horizons, and I feel like I definitely was able to expand and grow.

Frothingham: So how did you overcome the language struggles?

Velasquez: Oh, so someone told me that the best way to be a better writer is to read more and to read certain types of books, and so that’s what I was doing. I felt like I had always loved science, but when you read science books, it’s not the same.

[00:17:59] So I got into reading more novels and just really enjoying
some books similar to what I was exposed to freshman year in my CIV classes--Cultures, Ideas, and Values. I think that was really beneficial.

**Frothingham:** What do you look back on in retrospect and appreciate about your time at Stanford that you perhaps didn’t really realize when you were a student here?

**Velasquez:** I think all the blood, sweat, and tears. I have my Stanford degree. I think it’s somewhere in the house. I think it’s in the living room somewhere. But whenever I look at it, it just reminds me that I can do anything that I set my mind to, because it was really hard to get that degree, [both laugh] let me tell you. That was no walk in the park for me.

[00:18:55] And so I think maybe I didn’t appreciate that trial by fire at the time, but I think in retrospect it’s probably something that I value the most because it instilled in me a confidence where I always have that faith in myself now that if I really am determined to accomplish something, I can.

**Frothingham:** To go with that, what was your proudest moment at Stanford?

**Velasquez:** I think it was probably graduation when my family came up, my grandmother and my aunts and uncles and cousins, and for them to be able to attend a college graduation, because they hadn’t attended a college graduation before aside actually from one of my aunts.

[00:19:47] My aunt did go to Fresno State and she got her degree from Fresno State. But she is a lot older than me, and I think unfortunately when she went, it wasn’t as celebrated I think by the family. I think other than maybe my grandmother, I don’t think people attended that graduation.
Frothingham: The future generations that are younger than you, have they gone on to go college?

Velasquez: Yes, actually. I’m really excited. I have cousins that they’ve graduated with their PhD from Berkeley. My other cousin, she’s going to graduate this year with a PhD in psychology. I think it’s awesome. I just have an MBA. I don’t have a PhD. [laughs] But I think it’s awesome to see that. They always tell me that I was really instrumental in encouraging them because they saw that I always prioritized school. I did start my master’s program when my son was like four months old. So being a single parent and raising my son and working fulltime and being a fulltime graduate student, just seeing that, my family, they were like, “Wow, if she can do it, I can do it, too.” So I think that was cool.

Frothingham: [00:21:12] How old is your son now?

Velasquez: He’s sixteen. He’s going to be seventeen April 12. He really wants to come here. I don’t know. We’ll see. I know it’s super hard to get in, but you never know. I’m sure he’ll do great wherever he goes.

Frothingham: That’s good. What was your impression of the Latino community at Stanford when you arrived on campus, switching gears a bit?

Velasquez: Oh, sure. I think very supportive and I felt really at home, because a lot of them had similar backgrounds to me where they went to public schools like me and their parents didn’t go to college and they weren’t well off. Most of them weren’t. I just always felt comfortable. I didn’t feel ever looked down upon or anything. I really liked the camaraderie, which is why I’m here today. [laughs]
Frothingham: [00:22:18] Hopefully you’ll reconnect with some people. So you talked a little bit about how you got an MBA after you went to Stanford. When did you get the MBA? What did you do after graduation?

Velasquez: Oh, sure. I actually became pregnant really soon after I graduated, and it wasn’t planned. I was actually hoping to go to medical school. Being a pre-med student and having friends that were Stanford medical students and just knowing what their schedules were like, I just felt like--being a single parent and not having a partner, I felt, “I don’t think that I can be a great mom and a great student.”

[00:23:01] I felt like for the time being, I needed to pick one. So I thought, “Well, if I go to business school,” I went to Fresno State for my MBA, “I could live in Fresno.” Not with my parents because I really enjoyed having my independence. I lived by myself with my son. But I thought it would be great for him to grow up around family, and I felt like even if I did go to medical school later, the MBA would serve me really well, just having that foundation. That’s why I decided business school--and kind of last minute, too. I was pregnant, and I think the application was due within the next two weeks or something when I found out.

[00:23:53] I actually walked in to take the GMAT without knowing what kind of test it was, how long it was going to take, what kind of questions, nothing. So then afterwards, I was just like, “Oh my gosh, I just hope that I didn’t completely bomb it.” But as it turned out, I did really well, [and] I got a scholarship for business school so that I didn’t have to pay. It was a merit scholarship.
And then I needed to move to Fresno without--I guess they take a long time to send out the official letters. I talked with the dean of the school, and he said--because I asked him and needed to know if I was going to be accepted or not--he was like, “Absolutely, and you’re going to be our star.”

I was like, “Okay. I’m going to take you at your word because I’m going to pack up and move down there, and I’m going to be really disappointed if I get a rejection letter in the mail.”

And he was like, “Oh, no, no. You’re definitely in.” So I moved.

Frothingham: [00:24:54] I guess to conclude, and then we’ll let you get back to reuniting, but what advice would you have for current Stanford Latina and Latino students?

Velasquez: I would just say really always have that faith in yourself that if you really want to do something, you can. I can’t tell you how many times I failed and failed and failed and failed, but just that persistence and being like, maybe it’s pigheadedness, but “I’m not giving up. I really want to do this, and I’m going to do it. If it takes me ten tries, it’s going to take ten tries. But I’m going to do it.” I think it’s really don’t ever give up on what it is that you’ve set your mind to. Whatever dream you have, you can do it.

Frothingham: All right, well, thank you so much.

Velasquez: Thank you.

Frothingham: This was really fun.

Velasquez: Thank you.

[End of Interview with Araceli Velasquez - March 22, 2019]
Interviewer Biography

Emma Frothingham

Emma Frothingham has been the Oral History Program Assistant since September 2018. She holds a bachelor’s degree in History, Music, and German from Beloit College and is working on her master’s degree in Library and Information Science from Simmons University.