

J: Ok, it's recording now. This is Open Sounds of New Orleans, interviews. We're here today with a lady—what's your name?

M: My name is Maribel.

J: And where are you from?

M: From El Salvador.

J: And where do you live now?

M: In New Orleans.

J: And how long have you lived in New Orleans?

M: Three years.

J: And what's your neighborhood like, where you currently live?

M: More or less...

J: Why more or less?

M: It's a little dangerous.

J: Really?

M: Yes, quite dangerous.

J: What do you do there? ... What do you do in your neighborhood?

M: Oh, well, I have hardly any friends, I stay in my house, closed in, I don't get involved with anybody—to avoid problems.

J: I understand. Can you describe for us a bit about why you came to live in New Orleans?

M: I came here because my husband brought me, because after Katrina there was a lot of work. So we came to live here. And I like it a little—well I like it more because it's almost the only place that I've lived, I like it.

J: But your husband lived here before you?

M: Yes, but he lived in Houston, he came from there, but we like it better here.

J: You like it better here?

M: Yes.

J: Can you tell us about some of the important differences between the life here and in your country?

M: There's a big difference, because El Salvador is a very small country that lacks many things... there's very little work and you earn way too little, what I earn here in one week, I would get in six months there. It's alright here, because my family is alright, and I'm a little better too.

J: What work did you do in El Salvador?

M: I was a vendor, I sold whatever I could, anything that would sell, I sold it. I liked that.

J: You like business...

M: I like business.

J: Would you like to start another business?

M: Yes.

J: But a more successful one.

M: Yes, better.

J: What do you miss most about your home?

M: My children. That's the most important. My mother too, but my children are the most important.

J: And what are your children like? How old are they, what are their names...

M: I have a little girl, nine years old, her name is Gabi, I feel that she's the one that needs me the most because she's a girl, and she's approaching an age where she needs a lot of "cuidado" (attention, care). This is what causes me despair sometimes, sometimes I say to myself "I'm going" but... many things keep me here. It keeps me here that I want to "salir adelante" (move forward, get ahead, improve one's circumstances), that stops me a lot. I explain to her that I want to get ahead, that she should give me a little time, a little more time. And she understands me, she's a big girl and she understands me a little. But the boy, sometimes he doesn't understand and sometimes he's rebellious. He's quite rebellious, my son. But there, I think, God willing, I'll get there in time to be able to explain to him, why I'm here...

J: How old is your son?

M: He's five. But I left him when he was two. After I left him, a year passed before he would speak to me again. Because he was angry that I had left him. He behaves very badly with me, because I left him so little, but right now he can't understand the situation, why I'm here right now, he doesn't understand, but one day he will.

J: And while you're here, you're trying to help, to support, your family and your children?

M: Yes, more than anything I support my mother. My mother and my children. But I help just about everyone in my family, when I can. Yes, I help them a lot, because I know what kind of situation they

have there in El Salvador.

J: And how is the situation in El Salvador?

M: It's really hard. Sometimes I send thirty dollars to my brother, and thirty dollars is a lot because with that he can pay for a place to live. And they're happy with that thirty dollars I give them. So I can give 30 to one, 30 to another, and I feel good about myself too, so that helps me, to feel good about myself.

J: Of course. Um...what is something that impresses you about New Orleans and what is something you don't like?

M: I'm impressed by...the people, how they live, with so much freedom, that they can...they just are what they are, in the street, at home. Here, there's a freedom that doesn't exist in El Salvador. I see that here, people respect each other, in Salvador—no. Sometimes the people in El Salvador are really stupid. They don't respect people as they are, and here they do.

J: In what sense do they “respect” people here?

M: The people...talking about, well here I see couples, maybe woman and woman, and you see them—like it's no big deal, it's fine, because here you're free. It's a free country. And in Salvador no, they don't respect people. So this is something I like here, that they respect people just as they are.

J: And something you don't like about the city?

M: What I don't like is that...it's very dangerous, that's what I don't like. I'm a little afraid, because it's very dangerous. But the important thing is that one needs to just stay in the house and not go out, so nothing happens and everything's fine.

J: And talking about that, how do you feel here as a new resident and an immigrant in this city?

M: I feel fine, I like New Orleans, I like it--I've met many types of people, different types but more than anything I've met wonderful people that have been really great to me, that have given me work, helped me...I feel good. I've encountered more good people than bad people. For that reason I like it.

J: Excellent. In your opinion, what are some of the biggest problems facing immigrants in this city and what should we do to resolve them?

M: Well, I think that the biggest problem that people, people like me, have here is the language problem. The language is the most important, because one can't talk to the people, the people can't talk to one, it's really complicated, but I think that's the most important, that one has to dedicate oneself to speaking in English, for me that's the most important. I think it's the most important.

J: And what happens if you can't speak English?

M: Well, lots of problems, because I've seen cases where the police can't deal with someone, so they think, better just to take them in, that's the easiest solution. I had a problem. They arrested my husband, a year ago. The police stopped us, it was more than a year ago, and they asked us if we didn't speak English, and we told them “no.” And they started laughing, laughing but mocking us, and we didn't

understand anything—nothing! And they took out my husband and arrested him. And it was just the ticket that was expired, it was nothing! But he (the officer) started to laugh and he told him to get out, and he put him in handcuffs and took him away. That is, he wanted to resolve the problem but as we couldn't explain ourselves, they just took him away.

J: Wow. Unbelievable.

M: And they fined us \$500. And it was a minor thing, supposedly, an expired ticket is a minor thing.

J: Do you mean the license plate was expired?

M: No, the “ticket” you know the sticker thing that goes on the glass?

J: Ah...

M: The brake tags were expired, so he, the only thing he did was arrest my husband. I was there crying, I didn't know what to do, just stayed there crying so...for that reason I say that speaking the language is the most important, so you understand people and the people understand you.

J: And not speaking the language affects your work life too?

M: Oh, a lot. Too much. It affects it a lot, because one can't communicate. In my work, the boss speaks a little Spanish, but I can't really get across to her how things are, when there are problems. She always has to find out from other people, another way—not how things really are, because when other people explain, those that can speak English, they explain things to their own benefit. So that's how things are.

J: You told me once too that because of the language, because one can't defend oneself, that they don't pay you fairly either.

M: Yes, I've gone to work many times, and the people---I always really dedicate myself to doing a good job, so that the people feel happy, but they, when they see that you can't speak much English, they pay you whatever they feel like, they give you \$30 whatever, so I've left many people with this problem. Me, what I do is, I go home and feel sad, sometime I have a cry, but...I don't go back there, I stay in my house I think it's better not to go, my God, so I don't feel like....how I feel like...

J: Like they're exploiting you?

M: Yes, like, humiliated. Like when I do my work well, and they don't pay me what we agreed, I feel humiliated, like she's just doing whatever she wants with me, and this makes me sad, sometimes I go home and cry, but later I think 'no, my God, I'm not going back' and this is how I resolve it. Better not to go back.

J: You told me that you wanted to speak English and you're studying English right?

M: Yes, I'm studying English, I like to, I want to learn.

J: How do you feel if we talk in English for a bit now?

M: That's okay.

.....
[In English]

J: Okay, Maribel. Why do you like studying English?

M: I want a better job. Education is very important for me because I didn't start in my country. I never went to a school.

J: Are you a good student now?

M: Yes, I am. I like studying English.

J: Good. And she is a good student, she's one of our best.

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J: Okay, we're going to go back to Spanish now. I have just one more question for you. What is it that you hope to achieve with your time in New Orleans, do you think you'll stay here, and uh, what are your dreams for the future?

M: I would like to stay in New Orleans, but because of my children I'll have to return to my country. But I think I've come here for a purpose. I don't have anywhere to live (in El Salvador) and that was the reason we came here. We want to buy a little house, even if it's really small, and me, when I get that I want to leave to be with my children. I don't want to lose more (time) of them. So I'll be satisfied with that. After, I can go selling whatever and get enough for our daily needs but, yes, we do want to have a house.

J: It's important to have a house.

M: Yes.

J: So, you've said that you want two things, to learn English, to buy a house and maybe a third thing would be having your children with you...

M: Yes. That is, I would like to have my kids with me here, because I know that here the education is a lot better than in Salvador. Back there in El Salvador, if the mother doesn't have enough to support you going to school, you don't go and there you go, case closed. I see that here that's the first thing for kids, that they have to go to school and for that reason I'd like to have my children here. But since I know I can't, I'll have to go back.

J: For the moment.

M: What keeps me for the time being, I don't know if it'll be a long time or a short time but, I want to study. I want to study.

J: Thanks for talking with us...

M: Thanks to you too.

J: Any other comments?

M: No.

J: Okay.