

**Sarasota Oral History Project  
New College of Florida, Fall 2016**

**Interview with:** Luz Corcuera

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**Interviewer:** Milo Bickel

*Luz Corcuera is the Executive Director of Unidos Now. She has lived in Sarasota for 16 years, and is originally from Peru. Luz is an advocate for community building, and works with her organization focusing on education attainment for Latinos in Sarasota-Manatee. She advocates inter-generational community involvement in bettering the lives of young people. She is outspoken about issues of gendered, economic, environmental, and racial justice, and promotes community service as the key to betterment of oneself and of the communities one belongs to.*



**Milo:** Can you introduce yourself and your organization a little bit?

**Luz:** Well, I'm Luz Corcuera, executive director of Unidos Now. We are a not for profit organization that seeks to empower Latinos to achieve their American dream, and by doing so we focus on education attainment for low income first generation college students. Our vision is to create a culture of college going for all ages, so we are starting as early as elementary school and middle school now.

**M:** Awesome! I know that last time we met, we talked about community a lot. How would you define community?

**L:** Community is a very important concept, especially for Unidos Now and what we do because nothing happens in isolation. I think community is -- nothing happens in isolation, community is extremely important. We really are interconnected with each other in many ways and we need to work together. The issues that take place in the community should matter to all of us whether they are related to children, to the elderly, to the youth, these are all our children, our youth, and

our seniors and I think it's important that we understand that and we make sure that when we invest in some sector in particular, we are investing in the future of our community. Luckily this is a very nice community, I love Sarasota-Manatee. I think we have so many caring people, very generous, and who really understand what's important and they support, in our case, education.

**M:** Are there stories from the Sarasota community that you're willing to share, just experiences you've had here?

**L:** I would say that from day one, I think the community has been very receptive to really looking out for people who are vulnerable, who are at risk and they've not only supported vocally but they've put the resources in place. Some of the nicest stories I would say are related to projects that I've been involved with such as leading the Community Needs Assessment and the Community Health Improvement Plan and bringing all the partners together. I feel that so many people really care about the environment, care about the well-being of the people in this community, and they are willing to give their time and share their talents and their expertise so that we can really work together, making sure that everybody has a place at the table. But also, making sure that we assure a healthy future for our leaders of tomorrow.

Some of the not really nice stories probably are related to how conservative this community can be sometimes, and for as much as there are so many people who are open to diversity and they value multiculturalism, some others don't view it that way and so there are so many stereotypes. They think for instance in my case that all the Latinos are Mexicans and primarily they work in the fields, and they are surprised to see so many Latinos who are educated and entrepreneurs here who have created jobs in this community. And also they are in the medical field and some other fields, and they contribute tremendously to the community. Some other stories involve also with thinking that immigrants in the community are people who are taking jobs away from others and they are exploiting the system, which is not true. There are so many people that probably will not take the jobs that the immigrant community takes, especially in the farm fields and the service industry, and no one takes away anything from anyone. And also that sometimes they are underpaid, and I don't think anybody would want to have a job where they are not being paid a fair wage.

**M:** Would you mind sharing again your story of coming to Sarasota and why you fell in love with it?

**L:** Sure. I am originally from Peru and during the years of terrorism and political unrest, my husband and I and my older daughter, who was six years old at the time, we immigrated to Canada and we lived there for 16 years. My husband was offered a job in Sarasota; he was transferred. I think the winter being so long and so cold in Canada made us explore a possibility of relocating here, and I truly fell in love with the area. I think it's paradise. I think we are so

lucky to have the beautiful weather and all this outdoor places that are conducive to physical activity and to increase our sense of wellbeing. Like everyone else, I fell in love with Siesta Key and so many of the areas in Sarasota-Manatee.

And of course, it was really difficult to adjust because it's a different culture and also that there is not a lot of support for multiculturalism. One of the concepts that I see different between these two countries that are neighbors is that we talk a lot about -- I think we talk about the melting pot here, and it is a very interesting concept. Pretty much it means that you have to melt in order to be a part of the pot. In Canada they talk about a fruit salad where you have so many different fruits with different flavors and colors and in combination it's a delicious dish, but also every person preserves who they are, their own identity. So those are two very different concepts. Also that in Canada they foster multilingual, a multilingual system. The official languages are English and French, but also they foster for people, especially for the children, to learn their mother tongue, and they have special classes on Saturdays so that the kids can preserve the language of their parents and I see these as a threat sometimes. I understand that English is really at the core, that everybody has to speak English. I see that as one of the empowerment tools for people to achieve their social integration and political integration, they have to learn English. But it's not something that can be done easily. It's a lifelong learning process, and I think there are so many nuances with the grammar and the pronunciation that it takes a lifetime to be able to master the language. But I do appreciate the desire for everyone to learn English. That way they can use their voice and they can participate in the civic life more openly, and they can be involved in their children's education and activities. So I see the value and I encourage myself, I encourage everyone to learn English because I think it's important. But I don't discourage people from speaking other languages. I think many countries, especially in Europe, they speak at least four languages, and that's something that we need to consider as we move ahead in our education.

**M:** Are there any specific times or moments or memories you have from Sarasota that really made it feel like home for you, like are there any really specific memories where you were like okay this is where I want to stay or be?

**L:** I think when I was working in maternal child health, I had a project which was called Project Moses. Basically it was a safe sleeping campaign for babies. There were so many cases of accidental infant death, and I worked in partnership with Connie Shingledecker from the Sheriff's Office in Manatee County and several other organizations, and we came up with these beautiful hand-made baby bassinets that were distributed to all the babies, especially women that could not afford to buy a crib so that the babies had a safe place to sleep, along with education and information on safe sleeping practices. I think we were able to reverse the trends of high incidents of unsafe sleeping due to suffocation and save so many babies' lives. That was a very special moment because no one really thought about who these bassinets were going to and why do we need to do these for babies that are not ours, necessarily, and the whole community

worked together. A group of women were sewing the liners and assembling the bassinets and knitting little baby clothing. But I think what really stays in my mind is how women in the prison system began sewing the liners for these bassinets, women that were having a hard time because they were incarcerated, but they were doing this with love --- which really shows that when you unite together and the community is focusing on something, on a common goal, and they do it with love and passion, great things can be accomplished. That's something very special that I will always treasure.

**M:** That's great! This project started as focusing on the environment in Sarasota. It was actually originally with water. which you've mentioned it was like paradise here. What was that first time at Siesta Key like for you?

**L:** I think when I lived in Canada, because the winter was too long, we used to go very often to Mexico to Cancun where the beaches are just beautiful too. And when I came to Siesta Key, I could see that this baby-powder-like sand and the beautiful color of the sea and just the weather was something extraordinary. And I think we really have to be a stewardess of the environment and make sure that we use every ounce of us to preserve this beautiful environment, that it's not only for us, it will be also for the next generations to come. And we have some problems, I think, such as public transportation, we have some issues, but at the same time I feel that this is such a beautiful place, that we are called to make sure that it continues to be beautiful, that it can be enjoyed for hundreds of years to come.

**M:** What's it -- you work for other people's children a lot, but what's it been like for you being a mother in Sarasota?

**L:** That's a really good question. I had my first child in Peru, and it was just great because I enjoyed the family support and she was able to see her grandparents. When we moved to Canada, we didn't have any relatives or friends, and so our neighbors became our friends—and that's an example of building community for me. How people from Italy or Japan or Iran, they didn't have any problem talking to each other or the kids playing with each other, and we used to have gatherings just to share our culture and our food, so they became family to me. When I had my second child, the healthcare system in Canada is amazing. Nobody really can get sick and not get at least primary care. But prenatal care was fantastic because there is protection for women, and I was able to enjoy maternity leave and be able to access so many resources. They have a system where there is a nurse who is paid by the government, and the nurse comes to your house and they see that you are doing well. They provide breastfeeding support if you need to, and they make sure that the baby is sleeping in a safe place and they have their own crib. The support and the education that a pregnant woman gets is tremendous in Canada. I think having both of my children in different places was very important to me because while I work with women who are pregnant and sick in prenatal care, it was hard for me to see that. There is not paid leave for

parents. At the same time, my older daughter who is a young mother now and she lives in Europe, she enjoys all these benefits that I enjoyed when I had her or her sister. But in terms of education also I see that when my kids came here, they were way ahead of time in their academic performance. There were so many classes that they had already taken in Canada, and so there was not very much that they could choose from. My older daughter was a junior in high school, and she ended up taking all AP classes because she basically had taken most of the classes. I see the differences in the educational system where we have a long way to go. So many of my friends say that when you live up north, the norther you live the education is better, but I think there are some really good schools here. However, I would love for every child to be able to access quality of education and not just because they can afford to go to a private school. My younger daughter was lucky because she was granted a full scholarship for four years to St. Stevens Episcopal, and that really made a difference in her future chances, especially the support for going to college.

**M:** That's great. A big part of what this project is about is just very personal experiences in Sarasota, and it's supposed to be gathering the history through everyone's experiences here. How would you feel living in Sarasota shaped you personally?

**L:** I think one of the biggest things that I have been able to receive is the community support. I've made wonderful friends who are very generous and very giving and who really understand the issues that underserved and at risk communities face. I would say that through my faith-based connections, I felt that I had a family here, and I made so many wonderful friendships that are going to be long lasting. I also feel that there are so many people that have so much wisdom and expertise. And they choose to come to Sarasota to retire, and they are able to share their talents and their time with organizations. Right now, Unidos Now could not do the work that we do in providing kids with all the tools that they need to access college because we have a great group of mentors who really give their time and share their talents to ensure that these kids have every tool that they need to pursue higher education and to go into selective colleges. These kids are low income and probably the first ones in their families to go to college, so it is important that they have someone that they can look up to, someone that's a role model, someone who believes in them who tells them, "I was able to do this and you can dream big, you can aspire to do this." I think that's very special to me, having met so many people who care about others, who support education, and who are willing to give their time, their talent, and sometimes financial resources so that we can continue our mission here at Unidos Now. I would say that that's very, very special. But also there's so many organizations like the local foundations who truly believe in what we do and for us, that's what we do with the kids that we serve. We tell them that we believe in them. When you have organizations that embrace your mission and your vision, it is very important and very special, and I am extremely grateful. The word that keeps coming up is always gratitude. I have so much to be grateful to this community and also knowing that especially here, in this campus, we have so many community agencies and knowing firsthand

how hard they work to serve people in the different areas, whether we call it health, education, anything else, we all have the ability to work together and to support each other and to network. That's pretty special to me, knowing that what one does has a connection with what the other one is doing and instead of working in fragmented way, we network and we put our resources together to accomplish the common good.

**M:** You mentioned gratitude... what does that really mean for you? How do you feel it, and how do you express it?

**L:** I think I count my blessings every day, my stars. Whenever I come across a family that is not financially stable and whose child has the potential to do really well, I look at my situation and I think, you know, I never had to go through what they are going through, I never had to experience the hardships that they are experiencing. That makes me feel extremely grateful for who I am, what I have, for my children, for the opportunities that we have. But also seeing that there are people like me, who feel that everybody deserves to have a good education, everybody deserves an opportunity to achieve the American dream makes me very grateful. And I am not shy to express my gratitude to those who support us and even to those that don't support us yet but potentially one day will, and make sure that I instill that in the children, in the kids that we serve and their families, to really appreciate what others are doing but also in turn to volunteer to the community and make sure that they don't forget where they came from and mentor other kids who will need them in the years to come.

**M:** How did you come to work at Unidos Now, how did that happen?

**L:** Unidos Now was born in 2010, and it is an organization that really focuses on improving the lives of the Latinos. Our slogan is "Educate, Elevate, Integrate." Even though I was very much involved at the very beginning, I didn't really participate as intensively throughout the year. But it was last year when the Executive Director was retiring and the board approached me, and I was asked to consider taking the leadership of Unidos Now. I think I felt that it was a moral obligation for me to do that just because right now we see the trend, the kindergarten enrollment in Sarasota-Manatee is almost at 40% Latino, so the Latino population continues to grow immensely. I was looking actually at some charts, and since 2003 up to 2015, there has been an increase of 350% in the Latino population. It is important that we prepare the Latinos from a very young age, that we work with them, that we ask them to keep in mind that education is an investment. It's the only tool that will really break the generational cycle of poverty. I felt that as a Latina woman, as an immigrant woman who values education and who sees that my own kids have pursued wonderful opportunities and they have succeeded in doing so, I have the obligation to make sure that everybody knows about their potential, their opportunities and to encourage them to dream big. And so that's how I came to Unidos Now. But also the board and the mentors and people that support Unidos Now had worked really, really hard to be where we are at. And

what I need to do is continue building on the successes of Unidos Now, but also continue to integrate the community at large so that we can see the results in the next five years. I think that in the state of Florida, one of our challenges is not only education attainment in terms of higher education, but also retention. The graduation rates in colleges are not very high, and so we still have a lot of work to do. But I think that it's doable if we continue to be a community, and as a community we can achieve anything and everything.

**M:** What's it like being a Latina woman in Sarasota?

**L:** You know, I would love for people just to see me as a woman rather than a Latina woman. But I am proud of my heritage of course, I am a proud Hispanic-American woman. But I think being a woman, in general, for us as women we still face so many challenges. We talk about so many gains that people before us have made in terms of voting rights and women's rights and pay equity, but it's still a struggle. And what I would like to do as a Latina woman is to inspire the next generation of Latinas, to tell them that they can be involved in fields that are not traditional for them. That they can introduce and embrace in their own cultural values pursuing a higher education, pursuing leadership positions, that they are entitled and capable of doing that and also not to be afraid to be who they are. But also at the same time, I think along with the rights we have some responsibilities, and as a part of this beautiful country that has embraced us, we need to make sure that we give back to the country. That because we love this country and we are very much a part of this community, that we always have in mind giving back in many ways. So volunteer work is part of leadership for me, is part of character. I always insist that they do that. Also having an investment in their own education. As a Latina woman, I think it's important that we show that we are capable of having some skin in the game. One example I can give you is that we feel that it's really important that in the multi-generational, multi-cultural work that we do, to integrate parents and grandparents because they have a lot of influence in the decisions that the kids are going to make regarding college. If they participate in the college tours, I think they will understand better where the kids are going and why it's so important. So in March, when we had a two day college tour scheduled around the state, we asked the parents if they wanted to go. Of course, the financial resources were an issue, but the parents invested in it. They conducted fundraisers to be able to go on the college tours, and then finally there was some -- an agency that wanted to match what they raised. I think it's important to see that kind of spirit, that you are willing to invest, you are willing to do the groundwork so that you can find and build those opportunities that will make you a better person, that will allow you to raise a better family, and that will foster this spirit in the next generations, that anything and everything is possible.