

Georgia : [00:02](#) Alright, hello thank you so much for meeting with me today. If you could just start by telling me your name with the spelling and your age and who you are.

Nelly : [00:02](#) My name is Nelly Moreno Shenk. And my age is 53 years old, I am 53 years old and I immigrated here originally from El Salvador.

Georgia : [00:36](#) Ok, and can you tell me where your family comes from and what country they're from?

Nelly : [00:44](#) My family, my immediate family is my husband and my two children. I met my husband in El Salvador where my country of origin and my two children were raised in El Salvador, we moved in 2002. So my husband is a United States citizen. So I mean he was born here in the United States. That's my immediate family. My family, my father still lives in El Salvador and I have two sisters living there too. My mom passed away, my brother also passed away a few years ago.

Georgia : [01:31](#) And you said you have three children?

Nelly: [01:31](#) I have two children.

Georgia: [01:31](#) Two children, okay. How old are they?

Nelly: [01:31](#) Yeah, Daniel, the oldest, is 25. He's going to be 26 this year in July. And my youngest, Sarah, is 21.

Georgia : [01:55](#) Okay. So how many years ago did you move to the United States?

Nelly : [01:59](#) I moved in 2002, that means 15 years ago that I moved from El Salvador.

Georgia : [02:09](#) And you met your husband here or before you moved?

Nelly : [02:17](#) I met my husband in El Salvador in 1989 when he was working for the Mennonite Central Committee as a missionary, a commissioner and I was working there with a non profit organization. We were 26 years old when we met.

Georgia: [02:17](#) Oh wow. What nonprofit were you working for?

Nelly: [02:43](#) I was working with a non-profit organization working for a development program in the countryside. That organization doesn't exist anymore. It was called National Workers Federation. It was for the communities that were working for refugees that were from Honduras because we have a civil war in the eighties, I don't know if you're familiar with that. In El Salvador, so I've worked with this organization to protect these people coming back to El Salvador from Honduras.

Georgia : [03:37](#) Okay, and can you tell me a little bit about your childhood in El Salvador and your education?

Nelly : [03:50](#) I come from a low-income family. My dad and my mom, they were, they were a labor, you know, my mom raised us at home, my father worked outside of Chile where he didn't have a job when my does something, you know. I had my childhood, even if it was with some limitations on income, I have a good relationship with my brothers, sisters, my father and my mom. So I would say that despite the poverty level that we had, we loved each other and and I don't have any trauma, you know. So, we supported each other because my mom couldn't afford us education after high school. My brother who worked first, he helped all my siblings, myself and my sister to get beyond the high school education. The first two years, so he paid for my first two years of college and then I had to tell myself, Nelly you need to start working and pay on your own. And he did that for everyone, the same with Sonia and Cecilia, my sisters. So my three sisters, and Rolando, that's my brothers name, we got an education, we finished college before that and after my college I worked for this non-profit organization, I met Harold, I got married, I had my two children and when Sarah was four years old I got my master's in Business Administration. So that was my nuclear family, my mom and dad. So that was my education, and after working with the local NGO, the non-profit organization I worked with the Mennonite Central Committee with Harold and then with the Catholic World Services. So I got experience with international non-profit organization working in El Salvador.

Georgia : [06:33](#) Okay, and where did you go to college?

Nelly: [06:35](#) I went to the, it's the, José Simeón Cañas (Central American University). That's the name of it, it's UCA it's a well-known university in El Salvador. That was administered by the jesuits. (writing word). This is ordered from Spain. Yeah. So the university was administered by these.

Georgia: [07:24](#) I'm not sure how to say that either.

Nelly: [07:24](#) Oh, jesuits.

Nelly: [07:42](#) So that was my education, I did there, at the same university, my bachelor's in Economics degree. Then three years later, four years later, my masters.

Georgia: [07:48](#) Oh okay. Did you enjoy college?

Nelly: [07:53](#) I do. I love to read and because I was working, I was working during the day and studied in the evening, my goal was I got six years, you know, to study and ideally have a full, you know, credit getting your bachelors.

Georgia : [07:53](#) Okay, so you had six years for your bachelors?

Nelly : [08:23](#) Just for my bachelors because I was working and then studying for a few credits in the evening. But the masters took less time, it was just three and a half years. So I do, I do love to study. I would love to have that chance here, but its too expensive.

Georgia: [08:40](#) Yeah, okay. So did you grow up with a religion? Like were your parents religious or are you currently religious?

Nelly: [08:53](#) My mom and my dad, yes. I was raised in the Catholic religion, and I couldn't say that I was too religious, but as a teenager, I used to go to the church, you know, and be part of all the traditions as a Catholic. At home it's about eighty percent of the population are Catholic. So, you know, it's everything, everything, Easter and my grandma going to those processions. Now here in the United States, my husband is from the mennonite background so we agreed that we were going to attend in this country, the Mennonite church, and in El Salvador the Catholic church.

Georgia: [08:53](#) Right, so we're your kids raised...

Nelly: [10:00](#) (laughing) that's a good question, you'll have to ask them. But they were raised as Catholic in El Salvador and they, you know, they baptized, they are baptized as a Catholic. But moving here, we were thinking that I would go to the Catholic and then go to the community Mennonite church. That was a little confusing, so I'm just going to the Mennonite church and I cannot say that I am Mennonite, but I do respect all their beliefs and I shared their values too. So I feel comfortable going to the community Mennonite and I still sometimes go to the Catholic Church because I love to see my people too.

Georgia : [10:40](#) Do your kids live in, well do they live in the United States too?

Nelly : [10:48](#) Daniel is living in Boston and he moved two, three years ago. He's going to get married soon. And my daughter, Sarah is doing a practical in DC, Washington DC working for a non profit organization. She's studying social work at EMU and she's going to graduate in May.

Georgia : [11:18](#) Wow, okay. Do you think she was influenced from your line of work to go into social work?

Nelly : [11:26](#) Oh yeah, oh yeah, I think so. My husband and I are pretty active in the community, so she wasn't born. She also came here to do some intern at Skyline Literacy, my work, and she's doing something similar. Yeah I would think so that she has been influenced, both. Daniels in business because he loves traveling. He helps groups going to Spain or Europe for tournaments. He's a travel agent, but the focus is to get groups and do tournaments. So he's in a different field, but I feel myself sometimes that I am a business woman too. Working with students, clients, doing some marketing.

Georgia: [12:22](#) Yeah, and what does your husband do?

Nelly : [12:28](#) He's a client counselor for the Community Services Board. He worked with youth that have a problem and are referred by the court. They need an intensive plan, you know, to get out of trouble and it's intensive home care or something like that.

Georgia : [12:53](#) Okay, and you said that you guys came to the United States in 2002?

Nelly: [12:53](#) 2002, yes.

Georgia: [13:00](#) Okay, so how was that experience? How was the immigration process and trying to assimilate into the American culture and ..

Nelly : [13:13](#) I think that my first experience here in United States comes from, not only from when I moved here, it comes from when I got married to Harold. You know, because we have to assimilate our different way how to raise children, provide education, figure out our finances, you know. And I think that we have the privilege to come every year for vacation before I moved thirteen years later when I got married to him. So I didn't have a, how you say, a cultural shock because I was blessed to be assimilating over the years. However that was the part, I remember that the second year he brought me here, his parents lived in Pennsylvania. So we did that trip from Pennsylvania going to Atlanta, Georgia. And when I crossed this valley I said, Oh, this is a beautiful place, I can live here. And we did have that thought to move here, so, then he started at EMU, and he got a masters too. We moved because the reason that he needed to finish his masters. He was doing something in El Salvador but then in the last year or so he supposedly was going to learn the language and then move back but, we stayed. So the most difficult part was that, the language that was my, we would meet no new people because we have friends, American friends, we have a Catholic connection with the, some friends here who are Hispanic. So I think that the barrier, the language barrier was the main thing that put me in some depression sometimes the first six months and missing my parents too. I missed my parents a lot and I wanted to just to go back. But after five years, maybe, being here in Harrisonburg, I feel that this, this is my home.

Georgia : [15:53](#) Yeah. OK. So did you work somewhere else before Harrisonburg?

Nelly: [15:53](#) No.

Georgia : [15:58](#) So this is the first place that you worked when you came to the United States?

Nelly: [16:06](#) Yeah, yeah. My whole life with my parents, then at twenty-six I moved from home and living in the same neighborhood, and then here.

Georgia : [16:10](#) Right. Do you go back to El Salvador often?

Nelly: [16:15](#) Yeah, I travel every year.

Georgia : [16:15](#) Every year, just once a year?

Nelly: [16:15](#) Once a year.

Georgia : [16:21](#) Okay, and you just go see your family and..

Nelly : [16:31](#) Yeah. See my dad and my sisters, I'm trying to go on April 11th, that's our next trip.

Georgia : [16:37](#) Exciting, so you've lived here in Harrisonburg for awhile. Have you seen the town change over the years?

Nelly : [16:53](#) Oh yeah, a lot a lot. First, you know, the housing developments as maybe a reflection of the deep community that has been, you know, that's certainly now key in this town. So, I see more immigrants and I know that when I came I think that they were 5,000, and then I think 6,000. I mean now there are more than 15,000 just in this community. That is the experience of change that they have seen and I think that the response from the community is very open, welcoming, I think that there's no doubt about that. Maybe changes the more expression, how to be welcoming to the people. I mean that's something that more resources maybe but the resources go sometimes this is more or is changing according to what is in the local policies. For example, for example, for the first few years people can go for medical care to the health department then, you know, free clinic. At one point free clinic wasn't able to support, wasn't able to provide services to people that didn't have documents. And now in response to that, the community center, the health community center was created. So that's the kind of change that I see, so population, health development, some response to how we help the community, the movements.

Georgia: [18:57](#) Right. So you work for Skyline Literacy, how did you end up working for that organization?

Nelly: [19:19](#) That's a good question. I have almost 10 years working for Skyline. The executive director that hired me here, I have had previous experience working with her when I came to this country working for AHEC, area health education center. She hired me at that time to coordinate a program for health promoted problems, it's like (inaudible). It formulates, you know, learning how to help prevention, health promotion and learning about diabetes, how to take blood pressure or how to get involved in the community, etcetera, etcetera. So I worked with them for four years, then I moved out from this work and then later on Skyline needed a program manager, a program coordinator, and Beth knew my job and she hired me here. So I think that's how I ended up working here. So the boss that I had before, she hired me here because she also moved from this job and worked for Skyline Literacy. She's no longer here.

Georgia: [19:19](#) Okay, and what is it that skyline literacy does?

Nelly : [20:51](#) We have English classes and citizenship preparation and basically we teach students, people, native speakers who don't read at the fifth grade level and they need to, you know, increase that reading level to achieve any goal that they have. A personal goal and get a better job, retain employment. With the citizenship we help lawful permanent residents to pass the citizenship interview. So we teach them civics, how to read and write according to what the requirement to pass that test and interview. And for English classes, basically are for people with low education level and that they don't feel good in other settings in the other programs. Most of them are with a low education, low income, and on average they are between 35 and 45 years old.

Georgia : [22:04](#) OK. So working so closely with the immigrant population, can you tell me a little bit about the citizenship process. And as a whole, do they seem to.. is it achievable or does it seem like people have trouble working through that system?

Nelly : [22:27](#) I think that is achievable if the applicant, you know, work through the.. getting the right English level, studying for the civics questions and they are very transparent with information that they provide on the application. So why I am saying that is because we have some students that their acquisition knowledge, acquisition is very low, so they need to work harder by repetition, repetition, repetition. That is first and simple, some of our students they last two years to get, to grab that 100 questions or the language, to be able to express and to have a basic interview, you know, to say the name, contact information, history, previous history, trips, work, talking about the family. So when they come, many people say that, no, I don't, I don't retain information. I don't have time or yes I do, I do want but they don't feel confident. So that's one thing that the program does a lot, is to provide that confidence and reassure us that everything that you put on that application is the truth. You know, don't fool yourself because the immigrations office, yeah, they have all the information, they know what you are going to, what they put there, that they know if that's true or not. So we have a partnership with Church World Services, which is the refugee office here and they do all the applications as well with New Bridges, which is the other organization that works with immigrants in this place. We are not doing that because we are not certified, but we're trying to do our best to advise the people to get the right advising and the process to assure that they don't have any problem during the whole naturalization process. So, but 90, we'll say 99 percent of people that pass the class with us, they pass the test. But this time they are having more problems since this year.

Georgia: [22:27](#) Oh really?

Nelly : [25:20](#) So yeah, the lady that I knew that she could pass it, they can nervous or they hesitate two times with the question, with the answer in the question, they stop the interview and they say you need to take a second chance. So given that, so we are trying to be more tough with the students ,you know, because we have a mock interview. So were trying to have different scenarios, different interviewers and they apply when they are ready.

Georgia: [25:59](#) So do you think that they are struggling because the process has changed or...

Nelly: [26:04](#) We were discussing that yesterday, that we need to figure out if the process we know in the last month two ladies didn't make it. And the English level, they can talk to you they can go answer the question. But the reason they didn't make it, it was not strong enough to say you didn't pass. One lady they asked, "Hey, why were you married four times?" She was married four times, maybe divorced. So she said "Is that a problem with you?" And then the interviewers got mad. So I think that she shouldn't say that, we know that, that there's skills that..

Georgia: [26:55](#) But why, why are they concerned with how many times she was married? Is that something that's a legitimate question to ask?

Nelly : [27:01](#) I don't think so. I don't think so. You know, there are many people that do that, you know, and her whole story's there, very clear. So she's an intermediate student, she passed with good results. And the second interview, she was so nervous that she didn't go. So she needs to wait again and apply again because that's competitive. So this is something that we are trying to evaluate and we are having an information session coming with a facilitator, but a representative from Department of Homeland Security where they want to be more. Something's different now you know. Our feeling is they are more inquisitive or the screening is a little harder.

Georgia : [28:01](#) So if they don't pass the first.. or if they stop the interview for whatever reason, like you were saying, do they have to wait a certain amount of time to come back?

Nelly: [28:12](#) They have a second chance to do the second interview with the same amount of money because they pay \$725 for the interview, for the processing and with that money they have just two chances. If they fail one or they fail everything, they go to the second-time. If the second time they fail the same, they have to apply again to start all the process over again.

Georgia : [28:12](#) Oh man..

Nelly: [28:43](#) That has been the same. That has been the rule since I know of.

Georgia : [28:43](#) Okay. So you've sort of told me a little bit about what Skyline Literacy does and what you do, but could you tell me in a little bit more detail what your role is and your job description at Skyline Literacy?

Nelly : [28:43](#) My role, me?

Georgia: [28:43](#) Yeah!

Nelly: [29:11](#) Oh, my role is a product manager, I am in charge of the intake process. I also do the evaluation of the English level even though I have no background in education, but I learned how to do that, that's easy. And I am certified as an administrator for this assessment and read and listening. Our systems, you know, booklets that already have the answer keys and everything to score and grade. The students are in classes according to their English level, I do this with my co-worker, Barbie, because she has the curriculum and she works with the volunteers, the teachers. That's part of my role. The other thing that I do is to coordinate with our stakeholders or try to connect with the schools, with the other agencies, make referrals, organize the classes, work with all the program over the year. Yeah, I coordinate with the volunteers that were helping me with doing this. We serve around 300 people per year. So that's just a lot of work.

Georgia : [30:53](#) Where do the majority.. is there like a main place that a majority of the immigrants come from?

Nelly : [31:05](#) The first, the first years here it was Mexico and people from Central America. The last years just seeing our studies from the citizenship program, it was maybe 50/50 from Iraq and from Latinos. So the Iraq population has been growing it, Iraq including Kurdistan. So it has been more a participant in our program. So, in general, I don't remember how, but the Hispanic population is the largest in the community. I'd say Congo is even more now. More people are coming from Africa and some refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Congo. But we have more, for example now more African people in our class.

Georgia : [32:14](#) Okay, so in our class we've talked a lot about how just over time there have been trends of restriction of immigration and then promotion for different benefits. Just having this inside role have you seen if the country has changed having a restriction and that affecting the number of people in your classes or has it been relatively the same?

Nelly : [33:02](#) The restrictions affects the, probably the attendance. No, we have more students now, but that goes because the population has been growing, you know, the immigrants. But in terms of affecting the government policies, which I know that they are anti-immigrant and are affecting other levels in the community. In Harrisonburg there were three programs that were providing English classes. One program closed last year and so that's why we have a little bit more students now. But that's other events outside that maybe you know, like answering that question is not only because of that. So I am a co-founder for El Salvadorian committee here in this town and we are working with the temporary protected status holders through a campaign, this is my other job, a volunteer job.

Georgia : [33:02](#) Okay and who did you say that was with?

Nelly: [34:37](#) That's the name of the organization (writing) COSPU, and it stands for comité salvador para gente unida, in English it would be El Salvadorian committee for united people, something like that. What I'm trying to say is that doing this job is that we are seeing that what is affecting the immigration policies, the families, you know, feeling that they are going to be disintegrated. This is a fear affecting the level of the children in the schools, of the concentration, you know, probably grades, the fear, the mental health of the whole family as a unit, you know. So, maybe projects or other things that they are planning they have put on hold because their future is uncertain.

Georgia: [34:37](#) Right, and is that for the people who have applied for DACA?

Nelly: [34:37](#) For DACA, yeah. And are you familiar with TPS? Temporary protected status..

Georgia: [34:37](#) A little bit.

Nelly: [36:11](#) They're people that come from countries because they have problems with.. either because the disasters. For example, in 2000 in El Salvador there was an earthquake that made many people move here. And some people here, they didn't have documents. They had to change to obtain that work permits under TPS status. So now they had to go back and.. I wanted to show you that we do a rally. (pulling up a picture on her phone)

Georgia: [36:33](#) Oh okay, right. Was that in Harrisonburg?

Nelly: [36:51](#) In Harrisonburg, yeah. The El Salvador community trying to work with the.. that's my other work that I get more of a sense of what is going on in the community and how people are feeling about this and the immigrant policies.

Georgia: [37:00](#) Alright, so talking about the community, do you, what are some changes that you would like to see in Harrisonburg or in the nation in general relating to immigration?

Nelly : [37:15](#) There is a subject that has been very difficult to understand, the sanctuary cities. Are you familiar with that?

Georgia:[37:15](#) Yeah.

Nelly: [37:39](#) So we don't know..I am part of the Welcome to Harrisonburg council, which Skyline Literacy participates, Church World Services, New Bridges, the Harrisonburg public schools. The city hall Deputy City Manager is part of that council too. So we are working through some activity how we can enhance that this town is a welcoming city. So that part, as a sanctuary, we are not working on yet, but I would like to see how we can see that better communication between the law enforcement. For example, the police in the immigrant community, the companies that have the most of the minority as the workers. The poultry plants, for example, they can have better labor rights in their companies. There are many people there that are saying that the work compensation for any, you know, problems that they have, doesn't compensate if they have to leave work. And you know, that part is very hard and I know saying that is easy, but I would like to see that change too and I would like to see people more organized and try to raise their voice. I know that this is hard because people could come and they work, work, work, and then go from work to home. And so it is hard to organize the people. But in general I think that this city is a warm city, you know. I can say that I appreciate a lot about how many people do work for the community here, the churches, the churches are very important. They are getting us all together to work with some issues here too.

Georgia : [39:54](#) Mhm, yeah. And what do you think of the rhetoric around the issue of immigration in the public sphere? (mispronounced)

Nelly: [40:18](#) Its sphere. I don't know, maybe you say it right. It's esfera in espanol, in spanish. Coming from where? From here, from the city, from the government?

Georgia : [40:20](#) I know Harrisonburg is much more accepting of immigrants then other places in the world, but I guess, maybe the rhetoric before our current administration? And then how, have you seen a change in attitudes in Harrisonburg since the Trump administration? Or has it seemed...

Nelly : [40:41](#) I heard that there had been a change. I have some students that work for the poultry plants who said that after Trump won last year, there were some coworkers, white employees, that they

were saying to them, "hey, you have to go back to your country." And they had documents, and they were coworkers that had worked with them for many years. "You have to go back period." So there is a lady who is the coordinator, diversity program coordinator, at Sentara RMH and she was sharing the elevator with another white guy. And that lady is a professional, you know, and fluent in English, with an accent and because her accent was profound, the guy said, "hey, you will have to go back to your country." But she came here when she was 10, she studied at JMU. And he said, "no, you have to go back, your people, you have to go back." And these are different, we're talking about a labor worker and a professional worker. There is no distinction. We are treated because our skin color or because our accent. So fortunately I have not experienced that myself, but I see that there are many, many people that they, we are facing more prejudice or stereotypes. And you don't have to be too smart to understand that this is anti immigrant policies now. That's just the message. So programs that had been for years, people that had been reporting and said that this TPS, every 18 months to check their background. They are clean, they pay taxes and they have children living here in United, they were born in United States. And you are saying, ok standard is, you go back home, I don't care. Your children are citizens. They don't care about the security of those children. So they are only seeing that what seems to be, to make this segregated again and you know, it's just white supremacy.

Georgia : [43:39](#) Yeah, yeah that's awful. Do you know, I'm not sure if you would have the records of it, but do you know if anybody who has come through Skyline Literacy has been deported because of DACA or anything else?

Nelly : [44:02](#) No, see through our program I do not have that. We have one lady that she was denied for citizenship because they said that the process to get the green card was not, I don't know how to say, but was not proper process. So they have to hold that citizenship and she needed to start over again. Probably she needed to go back to her country, and so that was weird. She hired a lawyer. So I don't know what's happening with her, but what were seeing is more cases. More cases that you didn't do something correct in the process, just hold it. The screening is more deep, and deportation, deportation in this community so far I think that there are only a couple of deportations because we try to, you know, be aware of what was happening. And one guy that was, that they were, that he was on the border, I think that they, he has two more years so he wasn't deported. But that was, he wasn't one our students, he was pretty new here.

Georgia : [45:26](#) So when you personally went through the process of getting your citizenship, was there anything that you struggled with or how long did that take you?

Nelly : [45:46](#) A short period, I studied for the exam in six hours. So, no, it wasn't difficult. The difficult part for us when I was coming here because my husband was working in El Salvador. He moved to El Salvador when he finished college. So he didn't get any experience here in the United States and coming back, even though I was his wife, they didn't want to give me the visa. The way how I got to visa was through my, in-laws, my father and mother-in-law, they provided all the financial statement and I was quick, so we were ready to come here. Harold can bring my children, our children here, but I was going to stay in my country because I didn't have the visa until my in-laws were able to provide the sponsorship. So that was the difficult part, then the rest three years later of living here, I was able to get

my citizenship and the 100 questions are general, you know, information similar to what the government or Democrats in other countries like El Salvador. However there was, just learning the names, how to say of the people my daughter helped me with that. And the interview was only five minutes, six minutes. So yeah, they don't bother too much people that understand more of the intermediate level English. They do more with the people that they struggle now. Yeah. But at that time it was easier and cheaper too. I paid only \$300.

Georgia: [45:46](#) Oh really?

Nelly: [45:46](#) But now it's \$725 and they are going to raise it to be \$1,000. Yeah, in a couple years, they say that.

Georgia: [45:46](#) Why are they raising it so much?

Nelly : [47:54](#) The Department of Homeland Security or the naturalization processes staff and how to say, they are paid by the fee that people pay for the application. So all the operational expenses is through the fee of the applicants. And we're talking two million people or more, I don't know how many people, don't quote me on that, how many people a year. But just in this town per year are around 600 that come.

Georgia : [48:37](#) OK, well thank you for sharing all of that. So my last, sort of wrap up question would just be.. because this is going to be posted on our website, for the immigrants of Harrisonburg website. So when people listen to this interview and hear your story and your experiences, what are some main takeaways or what are some things that you would like them to know?

Nelly : [49:09](#) I would like that they know that the immigrants, that this great nation was built by immigrants. And immigrants that come in the last decades, they come because they want a better opportunity for their family. They fled their own countries because violence or poverty. So we want, we are here to work hard, we're hard workers. So we are also proud to serve in our community that welcome us to and that's a big part in the community. We want them to respect our staff and they see us as a member of the community and that we contribute to the society to make it a great community, you know. So stereotypes and putting labels to people, this is something that is hard to rid of. But hopefully with the message, with a different way that we can create, that we interact with each other so we see that more inclusive and more integrated. My message is that, see us as a member of the community. I fell in love with this community and when I say that how I feel that I belong to this community is how I am involved in different things. So that's why I feel that I am home, not only in learning English or in going to the church. You know, so that's why I participate, but if you see me, and think you don't speak the language, you know, I can't even if I know that I can.

Georgia : [51:07](#) Right, absolutely. Well thank you so much. I really enjoyed this interview and I'm excited to, you know, get this information out and share it with the public. So thank you.