Interview with Maria Andrade

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Daniel - So to start, Where are you from and where did you grow up?

Maria - I am from Ecuador, and when I came to America I was three years old. I was raised by my grandmother and my grandfather. I came over here, you know, to be reunited with my mom and my dad. At that moment, you know, you have a lot of questions, you don't know what's going on. But I was grateful enough to have loving grandparents that took that, you know, that responsibility. I was always with food and clothes, very clean, and going to school. So that was fortunate for me.

Daniel - Any big values that you grew up with, with your grandparents?

Maria - Absolutely. Just understanding that sacrifice, one of the biggest things is, my parents and grandparents taught me is, to make sure that all the sacrifice the family's making is not in vain. Do something with your life, do something with it. The way I was brought up, it was always a big open conversation that we were not going to stay in Ecuador with my sister and that we were going to come to America. So they prepared us to learn to read and write. And then you're gonna go to America, and you're going to continue to do something with your life. And that was that was the biggest thing, just do something with your life. And they also made us aware of all the sacrifices our parents made to come over here. When you're young, you really don't grasp this. But as you get older, you start connecting the dots.

Daniel - Okay, sounds good. So, do you have any memorable political experiences when you were living in Ecuador?

Maria - I wouldn't say more politically, I would say more on my transition coming to America. We took a flight from Ecuador to Miami and then from Miami to New Jersey. And it was American Airlines at that time. And I remember the immigration officer asking so many questions, I saw the Ecuadorian passport was purple. So here I was, first of all being reunited with my mom because my mom flew back to bring us and we came in with visas. So when we came in, we went from the house to the airport, and then you know, hopping on the plane to here wasn't a problem. Once we loaded off the plane, I remember. they gave us like, these little booklets for us to color and so forth. And when I was coming into, you
know, then the flight attendant gave us some yellow papers, and it just had a lot of questions. And at that time, I knew how to read Spanish. I didn't know how to read English. So I was scared, I was confused and my little sister was too, my mom only spoke Spanish. And the questions were not in Spanish. So she was asking, you know, asking everyone else, "Que dice Aquí" or what is this saying here? And then I was like, Oh, you have to put this, I was like, Are we taking a test? you're like, why are we doing this? My mom was like, no, no, the test is for you to behave.

We got off the plane on the plane, the flight attendant grabbed the papers. And then I noticed that there were different colors, different people got different colors. Right? So I'm assuming if you're an American citizen, you get a color. If you are on a visa or something, you get another color. And if you're anything else, guess something, another color. I now am making that point of reference, understanding the parameters. And that's where I was like, I was upset. I was like, why do we have a different test? And why do we have to take the test? That was my concept.

so when we came out of the airplane, And then they said, if you have the green paper, you go to the left. there was a guy, an Officer saying green paper, there. just pointing and then white paper that way. So then I was like, Okay, why are we going this way? We went there. And then there was an officer, he took my mom, myself, and my sister into the rooms. And then he asked my mom questions. And then my mom, he asked her, can I speak to the kids? And she was like, yes, you can. And then I was like, why? And then I remember calling and Telling her I don't know them. Why do I have to speak to them? She said that They're gonna ask you some questions and just have to answer truthfully. Again in Spanish. I didn't know English. I knew like three words. And then the guy came in and he brought in a Lady, she spoke Spanish. And she started asking questions. Oh, "quienes tu mama", who's your mom? Who's your dad? Have you been here before? Are you from here? Or how did you get [here]? And they started asking me one of the questions, is that your mom? Are you sure it's your mom? And then she said, she asked me she goes because She came in two weeks ago to the country to pick you up and I'm like yes, she left me with my grandma. And now, she picked me up. We're going home with my mom and my dad. And then she was like, where, and I was like, I don't know, I don't know [where] I just know I'm going with my mom and my dad. I'm like, I'm going to my, to my father, with my mom. She was like, Who's your father, asking me all these questions? I was like, I don't know anything. And that's when my mom interfered. And she was like, no, no, that's enough. That's enough. And then I was like why is she asking me so many questions. At that point, she was like, Okay, no problem. she was like, I remember her telling me distinctively. I'm sorry For being rude. But these are just national security procedures.

And then she was like okay bye with a smile. I guess at that time you don't understand. So when I came in, my mom, you know, had her documents. So she brought us on her visa. So we came in, and out of the room once you get luggage, and then I saw my father. And I had no recollection of my father because my father actually left When I was one and a half. My mom left when I was about three. I remembered her I didn't remember him. So when he saw me, of course, we hugged. And it was like, great times. And then I saw my dad and my mom and my dad would argue frequently, and it was always about the financial situation. And then, one of the conversations was, [my father] can't get a job. Because I can't drive a car. I was like, Papi, I'll show you how to drive a car. Because I had a car in Ecuador, I can drive. the little plastic car. So I was like I'll show you how to drive and he was like No, mamita you need a driver's license to. And here comes the story right. I was like what's that and she was like, a permit you need I'm like, okay, so then I go to school, I study and you go to school, you
study and you do the same thing. He goes, like, I can't, because I don't have any papers. So I was like, okay, but then again, you're a kid, you're just noticing these things, but you just, it doesn't click

Daniel - Yep. Yep. So you explained a lot about your journey coming here. And how it felt. So those obstacles you face with the interrogation kind of, you know, question asking, is there anything you could change about coming here? If you could?

Maria - I would say not that I know of, because from my experience, my personal experience, it was kind of like, a transition. And my personal experience, right, everyone's is different. But in mine, it kind of makes sense. You know, you're a kid, you're they speak to you about this, you have expectations. You're a kid. I mean, there's so much that you can't do, right? The only thing was I would have loved it if instead of my mom having to rely on people that look like her to tell her why that they would have offered and said here, the good thing nowadays, is everything is trilingual. So if you don't if this is you know, not your language, then you can request for someone.

Daniel - So a lot more accessibility for your language.

Maria - Yes. Now I see that so right now I'm like, Okay.

Daniel - Gotcha. So, so you were talking a little bit about how you imagined how it would be coming here like when you were little how were you imagining your life would be coming to the US when you left Ecuador?

Maria - In America, I thought that it was going to be fun, we're gonna have snow, that I'm gonna have chips, and pizza, pasta

Daniel - And we haven't gotten any snow this year anyway!

Maria - Right? And that was it. So I thought like the movies, I'm like, Oh my God. I was a little worried about the English. But it was not a problem because I was like, You know what? I'll learn it. I always had that mentality of if this is something I have to do, I'm going to do it no matter what

Daniel - Yeah. So what were some important life events that have shaped or affected your life here in the US?

Maria - I'll get to the point with the story of the driver's license. while my mom had it, she couldn't she she had her papers. She couldn't drive. My dad knew how to drive, but he couldn't. Ultimately they
ended up separating, I go on into, you know, grew up here, and then with both systems and all that stuff, but moving fast forward to going to college. Right? That's where my activism kicked in. The seed was always there. I always saw unfair treatment, I always saw how, when my mother needed something, and she didn't speak the language, people will look down on her, people will raise their tone at her, and people will be frustrated when she was asking for help. This is a basic necessity is not like, I understand that, if I was asking a stranger, hey, can you please do this for me, it's completely out of the way it has nothing to do with you. But if you go to a place where you're asking for help, and it says, ask for help if needed for like food stamps for like medical stuff, they give you a hard time in the way they treat people. And I also saw the disparities between different Latinos, how they treat them based on skin color. And I was always upset. I was like, why is that? Why is that fair? Because I was taught you treat people the proper way with respect and honesty. If they're mean to you, then you are mean to them. But you're never mean unless they do something to you.

Daniel - I always say I love it if people give me the opportunity to be rude. So you were talking a little bit about your community. How did you find this community? How did they become your community?

11:58
My community came in. As I started, you know, I went back to college. And I knew these problems. These conversations happen every single day, in the household, in my aunt's house, everywhere there are problems, you know, financial access, medical access, all of this is always happening. And I'm like, it can't be that we have to accept things as they are. And that was one of the questions was I'm like, this is true. We're always saying, we're always complaining, we're always having profound conversations because you can have profound conversations for hours. At the end of the day, nothing is being done. At the end of the day, I go home, my mom goes home, my aunt, my cousins everyone to go back to their realities, whether we like it or not. So I kind of gave up into that culture of I guess things are as it is I have to see for my own. It wasnt until I started getting motivated in school. And I decided that I wanted to be, actually, my undergrad is in criminal justice. Because what I wanted to do was be a lawyer, right, to defend the people and to do that. I just didn't know how to do it. I didn't know how to go about that. So being an adult, I'm a single mom, and I have two kids. So I knew that education is the only way. So being a mom, being a minority, undergoing the college admission process and then started getting educated in my political science 101 class, starting digging into the stuff and that empowered, that empowered me to find out and ask I asked my professors, hey, could you explain this a little more. They were gracefully unhappy to let me know more. And I ended up now this is like super untraditional because now when I was what, 22. I've always had this anger, I've always had this will but life went on. Now i'm an adult, I have two kids, single mom, so I have to work and go to school, I couldn't have the full college experience. As I saw everyone, I'm like, oh my goodness, you guys can do something about this. You should. I couldn't because I'm a mom. So those are my, that was my reality. But then as I started, I started you know, talking to my professor and the professors, one said, he goes, your you own limit, you are the only one standing in your own limit. I said, Okay. What does that mean? Because you need to be able to, you know, step out of your comfort zone. And he said, you know, you're not a traditional student. So you're not going to take you know, full on, three months abroad semester, you're not going to take an internship because that doesn't work for you. No, it does not. And I and I qualified for so many great programs. And I can't even take advantage
of them because I can't afford to, you know, go there, who's going to eat and all that stuff. So then I came across the Center for American women in politics, and there was a two week fellowship. that I could do. And it was in New Jersey. And that's what sparked my image. That was my magic on advocacy, understanding, like, understanding the system in place. I didn't even register to vote. And I was what, 24? I have not registered to vote.

Meanwhile, I was so upset all the time, you didn't know. So one thing led to another, you know, being in these spaces, which is very important having access to these spaces that educate you, that empower you that uplift you. I came across a Latino Action Network. And I had a brief conversation with the President. And he said, and because that was the thing, he was like, well, we're talking—when he did the introduction, Chris Esteves at that time, he did the introduction about, you know, things that affect Latinos and i'm like you're Absolutely right. And then I'm like, oh, but these are just conversations happen. And he was like, No, these are real issues that need real attention. They need real people. They need advocacy. And I said, oh, so I'm like, But who has time for advocacy. And we were kind of going back and forth like, who really has time-people care, you can't tell me I don't care. I care. I live it, I serve for it. But I don't have the time. I can't be in a space where I'm not going to eat by going, you know, to go do a rally or something? Because it does that, thats the impact. he goes like, well, there's other spaces, he goes, Well, you know, I welcome you to come into the be part of the committee, be part of the board, and the steering committee. I was like, Oh, this is cool. So that's when I started in that capacity. And then we started working really strongly on the licenses for New Jersey. And I was like, No, this is not happening to me!

Daniel - So we're gonna change gears a little bit, we're gonna talk, you talked a little bit about being a single mom got your kids what's a little bit more what your family life is like here and how New Jersey makes life easier, or hard for immigrants.

Maria - So I guess being a minority is one thing. Another one is being an educated minority. So I will, I will go back to when I didn't have my education and access to a better job. Versus now that I got my education and have access, it's a complete life changer. Like a complete life changer. access really means a lot. And being able to access certain spaces, certain doors, impact your life fully. You know, it's different when you even have state insurance versus you have the private insurance. And my kids feeling, you see the kind of different benefits that you get even like a pair of glasses, when I didn't have my full time job. It was, you know, from this blue shelf. Again, back to the this is your choices.


Maria - And you're grateful enough Because you're like, you know, I'll take it. Absolutely. I don't have any other means. Because you don't know. So I didn't even know any better. Now, for example, now with my job, full time and benefits. It's a whole different experience. You're going you get whatever you want. You're like, why is this even possible? And then you're like, stuck on You're always how much is that? Yeah. Yeah. Are you sure I'm not gonna get a bill? No hidden charges?
Daniel - Yeah, So you were going a little bit about how you, you kind of saw how in the beginning coming here, you kind of saw things for just the way things are, and you didn't really have any, like opportunity for any action, if you could walk me through a time where you felt or saw this unfair, unfair treatment, but other people saw it as “just the way things are”.

Maria - Absolutely, every other holiday gathering, when you talk about the licensing, right? When you when it was like, you know, holiday gatherings, and everyone's talking about, you know, what they're doing and so forth. And you clearly see, you know, the family member that doesn't have enough money, and then you see how that impacts their marriage. And then that leads to separation, leads to domestic violence, leads to a child growing alone. And this is normal. Why because, oh, this is the way things are, you know, of course, but you don't know you look at things so different. For example, my aunt would say, well, he can't do anything else. So we have this is the only thing that we can do. And my other aunt would be like You know what? No, let's, let's try to look for some stuff. There's some resources. And then that's where thankfully, I'm able to push in and say, Listen, I'm not going to tell you, I'm going to fix all your problems. But you're already working in construction. You have papers, why don't you get certified and possibly open up your own small business?

Daniel - I like that. That's good stuff. Yeah.

Maria - And here you go. Here are some resources. What? Yeah, here are some resources. Look, it's right here. It's all free. And I will never tell you anything that I wouldn't do myself. So I was able to, you know, help about a couple of family members to start their own process of ITN and educate them and say, You know what, this is, if not, then this is gonna, this is gonna be your reality and speak to them. I'm always very direct. And this is the reality. So if you don't educate yourself, this is as much money as you can ever make. What can you do with that money? You have kids? You have food you have? What's going to happen when your kids go to college? Do you want them to go to college? How do you think you prepared for that? You want a house? Do you want to live 10-15 people in one house? Or is it better to live a full family in a, in a decent, you know, spacious? Apartment, it's different, though. The problems of trauma that comes from that is different. And it's based on your access to economy.

Daniel - Yeah. So so it sounds like you really like giving people options, you know, so so what other things do you hope to accomplish with this immigrant rights work and what motivated you to get involved? It sounds like you, you've definitely expanded on it, you know, coming here from Ecuador, that definitely motivated you seeing that you can make a change. But what continues to motivate you today?

Maria - That same thirst to learn and to know that, even though we've been-we've made some great strides to even have you know, different languages, there's still a lot of people that look like me, that are not able to thrive because of a piece of paper, because of a document. These are people that are smart, that are brilliant, and have a lot to offer to make a community in this world better. right. But they
don't have that opportunity. So it goes back into, you know, working in the factory, and doing that kind of workforce, where we know, as much as even though New Jersey is one of the biggest, strongest labor unions, and they're very strong on safety and all that you still have very sad cases where our communities impact of the ones that have no papers, end up taking these jobs and up sometimes losing their lives, or altering their lives forever. So that that's my thing, just because I see all the time, in my community that we still- there's so much work to be done. Yes, we've done a lot. But there's so much more. And we can't stop

Daniel - what is being a part of LAN actually network mean to you?

Being part of the LAN is being part of change. my thing is I call it “presente”. being present. because when you're present, you're there, you see, and you act. because that's exactly what we've done. We see a problem, we will call the legislators we have no problem. Because we understand that the power is in us as the voters, you're there because we want you there. We we help you. And now you have to help us it's a two way.


Maria - People don't think so a lot of people still, even American citizens don't don't understand the power of their vote. They don't understand the power of being you know, of grouping and advocating because they see 100,000 people that feel this way. That's a big message.

Daniel - Perfect. Yep. Yeah. So could you describe a little bit the first public action that you took part in how it went and how it made you feel?

Maria - So my first public action was when we were when we were doing the calls to the senators to finalize and pass the bill, for the driver's license. And that led into Yeah, and I even though I came in towards the end of that campaign, we were able to be more pushed because we had more hands on deck, and, you know, calling them and then when they gave us the invitation to the formal signage of the bill.

Daniel - I'm sure it was great.

Maria - That was it! Being what, five rows [away] and having him sign and I recall, That's why I go back to the beginning. Because I remember that little “target”

Daniel - It was probably like a weight off your chest.

Maria - I was like, wow, how many people can do that? Right? How many people, me knowing that when I was younger, you know, that would have been accessible to my dad, you know, things would have been so much easier because somebody that has access, and at least is able to provide as a
human, and as a parent, as a father you want to be able to provide. And if you don't, if you're not able to, what do you think, you're human? You're going to be stressed out? Violence, all that kicks in.

Daniel - Yeah, so just for context, how long have you been a part of the Latino Action Network?

Maria - Since 2018.

Daniel - So about four years, so can you tell me about like, your most memorable? I know, I just talked to you about your first, you know, action, but what was your most memorable campaign or event?

Maria - My second one, when I was when I was on record to discuss the disparity in the criminal justice system, and I called in to advocate for better, better service in the, you know, inside of the jails, and the racism to be called out for.

Daniel - Definitely, yeah, definitely a good point there. So how have others reacted in your life to your participation with your organization?

Maria - Oh This is fun. So remember, my family, right? And Latino culture, there's no such thing as you do something without money. So all this is volunteer work, by the way, I have my own job, you know, and all that stuff. But all of this I do, because I want to do it and it fulfills my heart. But explaining that to my dad, to my mom, to my cousin's to my family members, where they'll be like, Oh, no, you're just in one of your events. Do you know what I'm doing?

And then with the kid, with my kids are, as you know, a lot of the times they, they come with me, I taught them since they were little, this is what your mom likes to do. This is what we're doing. And they're very, you know, they're very happy and very excited. They're like, Mom, are you really gonna rally? and when we did our, I helped organize the Women's March, the only one in New Jersey, the northern side that was really by minority women inclusive, It was because I was there with my best friend, which also is the [unintelligible]. And that gave us that being [unintelligible]. And that's where we were like, oh, no, we're gonna have the brown voice right here. And I was able to have brown girls be front and center like that was it. My daughter was part of that, being able to give her that opportunity to say Here you go. Enjoy this, this is part of life. If you don't, if you have the power, and you do nothing with it. What's the point of you having that power?

Daniel - That's huge and awesome. That's awesome that you get your kids involved, too. Yeah. So how would you how would your goals change within your group? You know, I mean, from from week to week, month to month, let's say

Maria - it depends on which project we're working on. So you know, and also the need. with LAN as we were noticing some bills are, you know, coming up for a vote, then we have to make sure and see, is this something that we need to organize a voice or organize votes. and go coordinate and being able to and to include more people because now we're like, okay, you know what? Now I have local family members also making the phone calls. Because now they understand and listen, all I need you to do is
call them you don't even have to say anything, but just call him and say I live here I don't think-I don't I don't support this or I support this that's it

Daniel - makes a difference. That's it they don't know how loud their voice can be.

Maria - And again that's it and like think about it now they're gonna hear that now there's 15 People from this certain block that feel this way. Because think about from that perspective, and then break it down to why it matters to them. so compare it to selling tamales. Imagine if one of your clients cousin says, You know what? I got diarrhea from your tamales. Then she calls running around and telling everyone through word of mouth. They're not gonna want you, but if you're hearing from a friend, one of your friends that you sold them to love them and they come and give you an order of 300 What does that say?

Daniel - Definitely goes around.

Maria - So now replace tamales with policy.

Daniel - Perfect, that's a perfect analogy. I love it. So what do you think? What do you hope to be different in the future? What kind of help from the you know policies, systems etc. Would make adjusting to a new culture run smoother?

Maria - I think one of the biggest things that offers a new Americans did, which is the little guide, that should be amplified. Because if you have a book or an article, or closer relationship, I know that there's different entities like you can't have consulates really talk to immigration and then talk to the city and then talk to the state. Consider such different branches. But that separation is what's leaving so much information out and harming us, for example, the simple fact of when you need something done by the consulate, regular consulates, their fees are minimal, literally pennies, because they go according to the economy of over there. So a birth certificate, it's like $2. But if you don't know this, and if tia Juanita, and my cousin are always going to this guy that has the hook up, and now he's charging you $200. All Because you can't afford to lose work. You can't do that. So all that plays into the role. Had this been a public thing where you know, or streamline certain processes where it doesn't have to take too much paperwork. I know paperwork is king. But what have you strategize where, for example, the real one Id.once you have that, yep. And make it applicable to any thing. Like Come on. Like that shortens so much

Daniel - Much. Yep, for sure. So If you create a policy or program to implement on college campuses, we're going to try to think on a college campus setting, to better assist students similar to your experiences, what would what would you implement you think?

32:03
I would add, I would add an additional department to the EOP, I would make that bigger, I think. I think that the EOP is one of the most amazing things.
Daniel - Just for context, what does EOP stand for?

32:19
equal opportunity program. And that's kind of you know, that's the, that's actually one of the programs that help you be not only first generation, but with some cultural additions to it, you need adaptation, you need to be able to adapt, even if you know, you got to college, there's so much things after that first generation you have no network, you don't know how to speak to and your parents are probably don't understand how much money they have to pay. And you may have to end up figuring that out all on your own and understanding these are there resources, or these are ways to do so I think a lot of is preparation, I wouldn't, I would say for the colleges to reach out more to high schools. to start a straighter pipeline. Now you can't do for every college, but we kind of know who has an idea. Well, this is a nice pipeline. Start with here. So you get acclimated and understand what you're getting into. And now you have a happy workforce.

Daniel - A big part of that, I think, too, would be the demographic of the area, like you said. Okay, so I got two more questions. In closing, is there a moment that is essential to understanding you as a political person that we have not yet touched on?

Maria - No, no, the way I happen to find myself as a first generation brown person. That's two different parameters. If you know, then, you know, we'll have that conversation.

Daniel - Yep. All right. Appreciate you. Thank you so much for sharing this oral history with me. I'll definitely stay in touch with you about next steps. I'm gonna get this transcribed and I appreciate your time.

Maria - anytime. Thank you so much.

Daniel - Thank you. Appreciate it. Thanks. All right.