



Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo

New Orleans, LA

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Date: May 16, 2022

Location: Rosales-Fajardo's home in New Orleans East

Interviewer: Carly Berlin

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription

Length: 1 hour, 5 minutes

Project: Mutual aid and food in New Orleans during the pandemic and after Hurricane Ida

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Carly Berlin: All right. So my name is Carly Berlin. The date today is May 16th, 2022. We are at Cristi's home in New Orleans East, and I am going to be interviewing her this evening. So to start off would you mind just introducing yourself for the recorder, tell me your name and what you do.

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: Okay. My name is Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo. I am a director of an organization called El Pueblo NOLA, NOLA Village, based out of New Orleans East. It's a grassroots nonprofit organization where we support majority undocumented Latinx folks, Black and Brown community in the East, with different aspect of lives, immigration, health, education, and civic, cultural events, but also, we've been doing a lot of mutual aid since the pandemic and since the hurricane.

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Would you mind just sharing your birth date for the record?

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Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: My birthday's October the 4th, 1977.

Carly Berlin: Awesome. And tell me a little bit about your family. A spouse? Kids? Ages of kids? I know it's sort of a funny invasive thing to start with but trying to get a little capture of your life.

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: So I am married to an undocumented Honduran male, and I have three biological children. My daughter is twenty-four. My son is seventeen. My youngest is fourteen. And I have an adopted son from Honduras that is now sixteen years old. And a whole

bunch of folks that call me aunties in this community and grandmas in the community, because now my babies have had babies, so now it's a whole different dynamic. And I just see everyone in my community as extended family members. So I don't have any families here in the city, just my mother as my closest relative.

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Everyone else is in Brazil, so it's kinda like you make folks family just to fit in spots that you need them to fit in. And I've been living in this community for the past thirty-four years.

Carly Berlin: That goes into my next question, but tell me how you got to New Orleans? What brought you here?

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: My father was an offshoreman. He worked for **Lex Brother [sp]** as a seaman, and his ship was always stationed here in the city. And when he met my mother in Rio, they first moved to New York but then the ship got stationed here in New Orleans, and we've been living here ever since. And now she's a widow and we just stayed, and after the hurricane just came back and made New Orleans home.

Carly Berlin: Take me back to the home that you grew up in. Can you describe it to me a little bit?

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: My home back in Brazil was a very humble home.

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I came from the slums of Rio. I came to where there was the dirt floors and you would still have to sweep the dirt floor. We'd have to leave the mark that you swept, or your grandma would still

fuss at you. [Laughter] My mother's the eldest out of eight so when she came to the United States. I stayed with my grandparents. And when I stayed with my grandparents it was because I was the first granddaughter and I was the first everything, so I was very spoiled, I believe, when I was growing up. [Laughter] And having my mom living in the United States, I always had this delusion, 'cause I didn't know anything about the United States, that my mother lived next to Michael Jackson.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: And so that's all I thought about the United States. But coming here found very different reality of life. Been through a lot of abuse with my stepfather and just had a really hard life as far as learning to advocate for myself and my mother at a very early age.

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And I think that that's what inspire me and motivate me to be as strong as I am for my community and some things that I see, because it's lived experience. I always tell folks that I am not a college graduate. I graduated from high school here in the city. I went a couple of years in college, but I didn't have the opportunity to graduate, but I feel like I've graduated in lessons in life. And I think that's where I have my P.h.D. in "bullshitism." [Laughter] Excuse my language.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: But also, it's just where I've learned a lot of things. And until I learned how to value myself and realized that I had a voice and that people wanted to hear what I had to say and that I'm a real natural advocate, it's when I started valuing myself and not letting other people undervalue me.

Carly Berlin: Because this is for a group that's focused on food, I'm curious about your relationship to food growing up.

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Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: So I remember, even though my father worked for offshoremen, a company, and he made really good money, I remember the abuse was very different and it was a manipulation kind of lifestyle. So he wouldn't give enough food for my mother. He wouldn't share the resources, and because my mother, for a very long time, was undocumented, he held that over her head. I remember being the one having to apply for food assistance, and one that had food stamps and having to have the coupon books. And my mother didn't know what the value were. And having to learn that at a very, very early age, making sure that we had access to food. And then, being from Brazil, I lost the cultural food that we eat because, at that time when I was here, they didn't have a lot of Latino store. They didn't have a lot of— where we could get it, so it was very rare, some of the things.

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I remember there's this dish called canjica that we eat, and it was amazing. It's very rare for us to find, but it was one of my favorite. So it was just like certain things that had me always focus on things like that, and accessibility to just taste of home. And so it's been something that's been part of me. It's been part of making sure that my children, to make sure that my communities have those types of things. So like I said, everything that I've lived I think it's what I am advocating to make sure that young people, little kids can have part of culture, part of food, part of accessibility to healthy food and things of that nature.

Carly Berlin: You were telling me this on the phone a little bit last week or two weeks ago but tell me the story of how you came to be heading this group El Pueblo NOLA. Where did it come from? Take me back to that time.

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Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: So I used to work in a school, elementary school, as a para-liaison, as a front office support, as just every little role in a school. And I loved working in a school. But I started seeing things in elementary school that happened when I was in elementary school as far as me having to translate for my mother in kindergarten or first grade. And even though I didn't know the language I had to translate for her, be an interpreter for her. And so, once I left the school system, I went to work for a nonprofit organization that was based for a Vietnamese community. And so, because I worked for that organization, it was a organization that advocated for youth in Vietnamese community. And when I started working there, we impacted and literally flooded the organization with Latinos because I felt like wherever I go I want my people represented in the space also. And they did a really good job in welcoming, but I think culturally it was really hard to adapt.

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And so there was some conflicts of— as you learn more, you see more, you want things to be more equal. And at that point certain things weren't right, so I just decided that it was time for me to leave. The organization was going through a huge transition, so I decided to resign. And when I resigned, I didn't take any of the young people with me because I didn't have the resources or the support that they needed. I didn't have a computer lab. I didn't have a dance

studio. I didn't have the things that I felt that they were safe in this space. Even though there was some work to be done, but they still had a space, a community center to go to. And I didn't have that. And so I decided to resign. I decided to just be home, and talk to my husband. And I remembered that I had just purchased a car and I didn't want my husband— 'cause we were dating at the time— I didn't want him to pay for my car note, so I was, like, I have to get a job just to pay for my car note because I want to pay for my car.

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He could pay for everything else, but I need to pay my car note. So. . . just started trying to— what am I gonna do? But people still called me, “Ms. Cristi, I need to enroll my child in school.” “Ms. Cristi, can you help me translate for this doctor's appointment?” “Ms. Cristi, can . . .” And it was a lot of just still need. And I would help. But then it came to the point where domestic violence— I was living in a smaller home than I am now, and so we would see women that were beat up. And so they would be bloody, or their clothes ripped. When you entered in my house at that time, it was right in my living room. And so if my kids were watching TV this is what they were being exposed to. So I was like we can't— I kept traumatizing my kids 'cause they weren't used to seeing things like that, but they were being exposed to it because of people coming to me for support. And so I was, like, I don't know what to do, but I'd still help.

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Then finally, one day, four women— I remember it was two Mexican, two sisters, and two Garifuna, Honduran Garifuna women. And they asked to have a meeting with me, and I didn't know what it was about. So they were, like, “We need to talk. We need you to do—” and I'm,

like, “I don’t know how to run a nonprofit. What are you talking about?” So I said, “Look, this is what we need.” And I didn’t have a computer, I didn’t have a printer, I didn’t have a lot of things. And I said, “If you want me to do this, y’all going to have to help me. We’re gonna fundraise.” So I had a meeting at my house right here where I’m at now and I had the tables and chairs set up. And it was a Thursday. I remember I had this meeting on a Thursday night. So we had this meeting and we talked about the areas. They wanted to identify health, education, cultural. And so we talked about it, and we said we need five-hundred dollars to start. We need five-hundred so I could register the organization. This has to be legit. I need a computer. I’ll find a used computer.

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My budget was only five-hundred dollars. [Laughter] So that Thursday night we had the meeting, we had all the notes down. We didn’t know what we were gonna call it, but this is what we had. And Friday midnight, in the wee hours of Friday morning, there was a community fire. And in that community fire I was getting calls after calls, one, two, three in the morning. And I’m answering the call and they were, like, “There’s a fire.” And so I jump up. I go out there, and it was starting to rain. These apartment complex burned over seventeen homes in our community. One of our community member threw her daughter from the second floor. The young girl broke her leg. So it was like we needed to create spaces for people to come at that time night. There was babies that didn’t have diapers. There was a baby that was crying. So because we had the chairs already set up and we had the tables set up, everybody came over to my house.

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And by seven or eight o'clock in the morning we already had Red Cross here and they were filling out the application. People were getting their hotels. And because we were there to translate everything went by smoothly. And this is when it dawned, like, we do need a place. This community fire is just a metaphor, but it really was a community fire. We need to be the one to support our community in having a space to do these things because our regular community is not ready to support non-English-speaking folks. Our community is not ready to care for. And so, because of that, we started fundraising for those families. We started fundraising for food, shelter, and talking to landlords and putting people in homes. And my house became, like, a donation site. But then people, when they were getting their Red Cross funding, they came back, they were, like, "Oh, I know you're fundraising for your organization. Here's ten dollars."

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And so the people from the fire that just lost everything were the one that were grateful. And then, I remember this Catholic church, this gentleman called, and he said, "God just told me to bless you with five-hundred dollars." And I was, like, "What?" It was just so weird. But we were also doing a food sale, and it was just all at the same time. So everything just came in. We had tripled the budget that we needed, that we originally thought of. And we started doing a lot of things. We started advocating for schools. We shut down— took out principals, we took out CEOs. We were kicking a- . . . [Laughter] And at the same time, time has passed since 2018, because this happened in 2018, that right now I wish I could do more. I wish that I could prepare

my community instead of just being receiving. I want to be able to advocate so then they can look at their own barriers and remove their own barriers. But due to lacking and due to not having enough funding I don't have that capacity.

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I don't know how to write grants. But this is grassroots, straight up the needs of our community. But I am really happy and really proud the amount of work that we have done, the amount of people we have fed, the amount of babies we have given birth— and we can take those wins. We have to celebrate those wins because, as you can see behind you, I have a wall also of memory cards. We have done over a hundred-and-sixty-something funerals in our community also. And that is part of living in this community. People are being born; people are dying by the masses. And so it's just so many different aspect of things that we do here that this is the first year that I said, you know what? I need to have a job. I need to go work because I need stability on how to pay my bills because not only am I the advocate from our organization, and there's a title of a CEO, but I'm also a part of my community that are in need.

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I am also a part of the community that have food insecurity. I'm also a part of the community that don't have a hospital at one point that we could go to. I'm also part of a community that lives where there is gunshot almost every night. I am part of that community, so those things also affect me. I don't have the privilege to live in another area and come serve. I am part of the people I'm serving, but we are the 911 of our community and we are the first responder of our

community. Before they call 911, before they do anything, because there's no trust within these agencies, they come to us first.

Carly Berlin: And tell me, so you're working at a school in addition to doing all of this?

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: Yes. I work at a school in the daytime. I work for a community member as interpreter and I write their contracts for their businesses, like construction companies, to make sure that they are legally writing contracts, they are registering their businesses, just to show the power of being a business owner in our community.

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One job that I get paid and the other job that it's still advocating part of the organization. But yes, I work in the daytime from nine to four every day.

Carly Berlin: So shifting a little bit, take me to March of 2020. What was sort of the context of what was going on with El Pueblo NOLA at the time and what did your work look like in those early days of the pandemic?

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: So March of 2020 I remember I was really sick. I believe now, in retrospect of looking at what happened, I believe I had COVID before even COVID was a word. I was in the hospital. I was on a respirator.

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It felt like somebody just walked up to me and turned off the light and I didn't think I was gonna make it. I was in the ICU, and they told me I was septic. Everything started shutting down. And so being there was, like, wow, what was that? I was just healthy, I was flying. I was actually

bringing kids back to their country, kids that were abandoned here by their parent and reuniting them with their family back in Honduras, and I was traveling a lot. Then one day I just got really, really sick and didn't know why. So after, remembering telling a doctor, "I need to get out of the house 'cause I have a child I need to bring back." Always thinking— and the doctor's, like, "Do you understand you're in ICU? You might not make it out of here." I had to learn how to walk. I had to learn how to talk. I had to learn a lot of things. And so it was never a thought that I was gonna die.

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It was, like, okay— I always think of, like, God wants me to rest. That's why I get sick. Or my car break down, God just doesn't want me driving right now. And so leaving out of there brought a lot of, like, wow, what really matters? My family really matters. My husband really matter. But I also had this dying need of my community really need to know what's happening. Then when all of this buzz about what's happening and what's gonna happen and these things— people couldn't believe— our community just, we didn't understand. One, the media wasn't addressing us. The media was all in English. If the information came out in Spanish, we were fighting to get it translated. What was happening? I was very naïve about it. People would call me and ask me about what's happening, and I couldn't tell people. I didn't know enough about it until we had communication direct with the city, with the doctor that was talking about COVID. We were doing the best that we could in doing Lives on our Facebook to educate folks.

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We started doing vaccine drives. We did a drive here in this community. And whatever they were telling us this is the information we were giving, but we also saw that when things started shutting down. When things started shutting down because our community are first hospitality, hotel workers, construction, everything started shutting down. So when things shut down people lose homes. People don't have how to feed their kids. And so you're starting, like, do we have this? So where do I go? Where do I get help? And it was a lot of that in the beginning, it was just what do we do? Because literally I was starting to put people together. Like, "Okay, you can live with your sister. Don't you think it's best if you live with your sister, then you don't have two rents? I understand it's hard, but this is what we need—" and literally started putting those things together first.

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And then people were just massive leaving because they couldn't pay rent and they were being evicted. The landlord was coming and just removing the locks, removing the whole door, turning off lights, turning off water. So it was just like one thing after the other, one thing after the other. And food wasn't even a thought yet, it was housing stability. And then it was kids, how do they learn? They can't learn in a computer because they don't have computers, they don't have internet. So it's like one thing for one person but it was, like, ten times harder for other people because we weren't getting the news. And by the time we got it it was too late. So it was so much at once. We had a lot of volunteers. The same people that needed the support, they became volunteers 'cause they wanted to be the first hand to get whatever information we had. We had no funding. We had no support. When people started talking about getting stimulus and people started getting— our community didn't get it.

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They are not citizens. They don't have Social Security numbers. And so it was, like, citizens could get it, but the American children could not get it. At that time I remember the City of New Orleans received a grant and they gave out fifty-thousand dollars. And I think by chance, by really somebody just mentioned my name, my organization name got put in and we were given fifty-thousand dollars. We were given six hundred gift cards of four-hundred dollars, and that was to help direct— just give out. They didn't need any Social Security, they just needed an ID. They signed it; we gave them the card. So when they asked me how many members I had, I had six-hundred-plus community members that I know definitely could use it. And I just went to a meeting, and they handed me fifty-thousand dollars in a box in gift cards. And I'm, like, "What?" Like, your legs shake. This is the first time I ever had— we ever had was, like, fifteen hundred on a GoFundMe and that was it.

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And then the Greater New Orleans Foundation just gives you these gift cards and they trust you. It's, like, we know it's not gonna solve, but that immediate support was so needed. And people were, like, "How do we make sure that everybody get it, as many folks will get it?" Because I already had a list, because I already had worked with people, because I already had this data, it was easy to call people and say, "Hey, we have this for you, we have this for you." And that was a huge relief. People realized that, "Okay, this organization is not charging me nothing, but they supported me with this." And then it was just advocating for more and more different things. But

I don't want to be an organization that just gives out. I don't want to be an organization of handing out. I want to be able to be an organization of a hands up.

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“This is what we're giving you but let's give you the steps and the tools that we probably won't have to get back.” But in that time— and this is still to this day— we don't have the capacity yet to do what I would love the vision and the mission of the organization to be able to. But that was the first immediate help that we received in that time.

Carly Berlin: So because this is a project that's focused on food, I'm curious to hear more about what you were noticing around food insecurity early in the pandemic and your efforts to get meals out to people.

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: So when the pandemic first happened, like I said, even though I know for a fact, because my household even had food needs, but it wasn't what people were talking about. It was first housing. But it became formulas, it became how do we talk to the local farmers that we have here?

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Because we have a garden, and how do I get you to donate stuff? So when we were giving out food, like vegetables, people were just, like, “Yeah, I want it.” And I remember the Greater New Orleans Collective that I went— I was invited to a meeting. And like I said, I walked in the room. I am an Afro-Latino woman that walked in the room. There probably was three other groups that was people of color, and everybody else was white in this group that I went to. Everybody had beautiful, great intentions. And I looked around and I saw how easily they talked

about how they were getting fifty thousand, sixty thousand, how they had access to buying a truck that was cool to keep—and I don't know what it was honestly but sitting in that group it just brought me to tears.

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I literally felt like, what if I wasn't invited to this meeting? What if by chance somebody didn't put my name so I could come here? I wouldn't even know these resources existed. I have to leave out of my community—and I remember that day. They had a meeting that was—there's always things happening, and I felt really guilty leaving, but I needed to go to that meeting. And I remember talking to Dan, and Dan said, "Oh, yeah. I could give you a couple of gallons of milk." And I'm, like, "Okay, cool. How much?" He's, like, "I could give you four-hundred gallons. Can you pass it out?" I'm, like, "Yeah." And remember he came with those gallons of milk and had not previously mentioned it to anybody and just did a Facebook Live, and I had lines and lines and lines of car. And I remember just getting all my boys and all the kids in the neighborhood, I'm like, "Look, your mama's gonna have milk first. Just come help me pass it out." And we passed out, like, four hundred gallons of milk. And then the next day, and then the next day, and then it was, like, other things. And it was food. And I was, like, "Wow, these people have been hungry all this time.

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People have been wanting this all this time." And it was almost like, well, it doesn't fit under health, it doesn't fit under civic, it doesn't fit under education, it didn't fit under my civic, where does this go? And it was, like, okay, this is what mutual aid is. This is immediate needs. This is

the need that they have. And so Dan was really— in that meeting I shared how hurt I was that I really— the only ask that I had is that if they ever get any other connection to just throw my name in the hat because it's not about the money, but I'd rather get the food and the resources to give directly to my community. I don't care if you give me a hundred thousand, but if you give me a hundred thousand worth of food then I'm okay. If you give me fifty thousand worth of food, I'm okay. And so that's how it pretty much was. It wasn't me begging for money.

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I didn't want to fight anybody else for money that they were getting. I just wanted to be put on the list to be able to get food for my community. So that's how it started. They would call me and say, "Hey, we have this, we have that." And I didn't have a truck. I would do it out of my car. I then beat my car up to the point, like, I had no more space. My car smelled like food. One time I think we forgot something, and my car was horrible. They were, like, "Throw coffee grounds." I'm, like, "Whatever." [Laughter] So that happened for a while. And then I remember there was a grant from No Kids Hungry that focused on kids zero to five. And we could buy supplies and things we needed. And I know we need a refrigerator. There was certain food we needed to refrigerate. And so I applied to get a grant of twenty-five thousand, and I wanted to buy a truck, a pickup truck, so I can go pick up more food. And we got the grant. I was, like, okay, I'm not buying the twenty-four-thousand-dollar truck, but I'll buy a eight-thousand-dollar truck and use the rest to be able to buy food.

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Because now we had, like, Muslim organization, we had different organizations throughout the city. We connected with Greater New Orleans Food Collective, and just different organizations that had food that we could go and pick up. And not only we would go and pick it up, but now we had a way to bring it back, and then we did our own food drive. At first it was just a little bit where we just picked up enough, and then we just moved all my couch and everything out of the living room and we just made these boxes. And then we would buy, with the rest of the No Kids Hungry, we would buy Maseca, limones, and things that people needed, culturally relevant food, because that was one of the things: to make sure that people were getting food that was relevant to their needs. And so we would get black beans and we would just buy the huge bag and put it in smaller bags. So that's pretty much how it started.

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We're just doing it and been doing it, and hurricane comes, so it's just one thing after the other. And it grows. Sometimes we have a whole bunch of stuff to give out, sometimes we don't. But once jobs started coming back, we started seeing it diminish a little bit, the need. But then there are times that what diminish for one family is an increase for another family. So I don't think mutual aid will ever stop, the need of food will ever stop.

Carly Berlin: About when was that you connected with Dan and started distributing food through them?

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: It was right after the hurricane, I believe.

Carly Berlin: Okay.

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: No. To be honest with you, I couldn't even tell you dates. I'm gonna be honest with you, I don't even remember dates. I just remember that I was invited to this meeting, and I got in this meeting, and I just cried, and I told them that they're lucky that they have the access because I've been fighting this for many years in my community.

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And I think they, they felt my passion. I think they understood where I was coming from. And I think that they knew that I wasn't coming from a place of hate. I wasn't hating the fact that they were privileged to get it, I was just begging to be heard for my community. I was just begging to say: "Don't forget us in the East, don't forget undocumented." And then, I feel really bad because I'm in the East, I'm in the eastern part of the city. It's a large community but also it doesn't serve the large number of undocumented folks that we have. We have a large number of people, but we don't have Mid-City, we have Westbank, we have rural areas in Louisiana that are not being served. And I realized that when— even SPCA called me and said, "Hey, we have pallets and pallets of dog food and cat food. Do you want it?" I'm, like, "Yep. Yep, whatever you have. Yep." And people from Houma, which is very far away from where I'm at, were coming to get food. People from all over.

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And I'm, like, "Where are you from?" And we tried just to get, like, basic— we didn't even need to get name or address but area and ZIP Code so we could figure out where— and people from all over were coming, Tangipahoa Parish. And I'm, like, wow, who's serving them? And I connected with a national organization that I'm part of right after the hurricane, Journey for

Justice. They were the first to drive through the storm. And I drove to Baton Rouge in my truck, and they filled it up. And was blessed that the Greater New Orleans Collective with the food, they— our story got out in the *Washington Post*, so we received a ton of funding, and I mean, like, over twenty-five-thousand dollars in personal funding, crowdfunding. And we were able to buy food. To this day, I just ran out of diapers. But we were able to get things that our community needed, and we knew how to distribute it.

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During the hurricane so many beautiful things happened. I would give a family a case of water and they were, like, “No, Ms. Cristi, I got water from this place. Give it to another family.” And it was just so beautiful to see people like that. They weren't hoarding things. And you would hear people hoarding. And I would have people, like, “Ms. Cristi, we got these food, but we don't really eat it. Can I bring it here because I don't want it to go to waste?” So this pretty much, like, we were doing it and it was all ran by people that didn't have a place to live. It was all ran by the community that were in need. We weren't paying them anything. We had no money to pay them. And I think everything that we do now, that's how we run it. I try to give out stipend, I try to make sure that our folks have what they need, but they're so generous to be able to want to help the next person. And I think that there's a lot of missed connection still in our city. There's a lot of waste, food waste that I see in our city. I think that a lot of these schools that are in our neighborhood, they throw away a ton of food, lunch and things like that.

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So that happened also, when the school lunches was happening, I thought that our school close by could open it, but they weren't open at first. So I was driving fifteen and twenty kids in my car. It's, like, "Okay, guys, let's go in. Everybody getting a lunch." And they were, like, "Miss, where you coming from?" I'm, like, "From the East." They're, like, "No, no, no. We'll have a car bring it to you. How many do you need?" And we started, like, with three hundred, feeding three hundred families. So I think it's just when you start feeding people you start seeing the real of the needs of folks. And I think that people that come and ask for food, there is still a shame because of the way people give out food. And I think there has to be a compassionate way to give out food. I think that when we give out food, if two families come in a car and they say they have four, we give out four. I'm not gonna question how many folks. And I know we want to distribute to as much, but I think that it's just that, it's, like, having that smile or having that love for people.

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And there's so many people that come. And I think that the kids— I used to drive around doing the school lunch and I remember pulling up in these apartment complex, and when people saw me, the little kids, they were just, like, "That's Ms. Cristi. She got food!" And they wouldn't even make it back inside their house. They were eating it as soon as I was handing it to them. And when you see that, and we're, like, we're in America. When you see that and you're giving out kids a little thing of milk and they're just downing it and then back in the line saying, "Can I have another one?" And I remember being in Brazil, being where I didn't have food when I lived in the slums, but we never got that desperate, and we're in America and we're that desperate for food. People don't think that things like that happen here, and it happened.

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There's people that are hungry. And we're supposed to be one of the richest country in the world but we're not feeding our people, we're not feeding our children? You're not having lunch programs, but you have CEOs that are making three-digit salaries? You're having folks that are benefitting because this is a business now, a school? So when you look at things like that it angers you. It angers you as a parent. It angers you as a citizen. It makes you feel ashamed because, I don't have. I have every assistance that the government could give me, but I use that assistance to help those that really couldn't even get that. And people that received pandemic money, some people didn't even want it. They didn't even claim it. And we had some folks to donate their money to us.

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And I'm just, like, we could end it. We could literally end child hunger. Really, when you look at it, there is a way to do it, but people are not focused on it because it's not a popular thing. When it's a popular thing then people focus on it. When it makes them look good to get votes then they focus on it. But they don't— food, when they think about food, they think, “Oh, they don't have it 'cause they're not hardworking. They don't have it because they—” And who does not want to feed their child? Who doesn't want to be fed? And the accessibility in our community of not having healthy food is the other thing. We don't have land, but we have so many freaking blighted property in the East, that if you focus on it, remove it from these scumlords, people that are abandoning— and give it to people so they can plant and create farms. Nobody's focusing on that.

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And I have this theory that sometimes I'm giving out, but I want to go up the river and I want to go advocate, but then if I go up the river to advocate who's taking the baby, who's feeding the babies down here? So where do you go and how do you do it? And I just hope that the people that are advocating for food, they're advocating, because I don't have that capacity. And even though as much as I want to, I value the place that I'm at, but I also value the people that are really advocating, No Kids Hungry, like that. These big advocates, these big organization, these big company that are advocating for people, they need to hear. And so when folks like you come and say share your story, this is my part of advocating. This is my part of telling my truth. This is my part of telling my reality. And then, because I'm privileged to be able to speak English, I'm able to tell the story for those that don't speak English.

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So that's the only reason. I don't do it for glorification. I don't do it for pat on the back. I do it because it needs to be written, it needs to be said, and I think people need to understand that when we're in this country, as rich as it is, and people are hungry, it should be a shame on all of us. I think all of us need to look at ourselves a little deeper and said, we failed, as people. So if I gotta cause trouble to get food, if I gotta call some people out, then this is what I have to do.

Carly Berlin: What you're saying is reminding me of just some different threads that have emerged from the interviews I've done from this so far. And one of the things, just what you were saying about food waste, was reminding me that so many different people have talked about their kind of mutual aid work being recognizing where there are meals getting thrown

away and figuring out where they need to go to people who are hungry. But also just this idea that mutual aid is something that is coming in when systems are completely breaking apart.

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And so I'm kind of wondering if you could talk about, what does that term mean to you? I think mutual aid is something that a lot of people have been introduced to during the pandemic over the last more than two years now, but I'm curious what it means to you?

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: So I never knew the terminology. I'm, like, mutual aid, what is that? I remember when the organization that I'm partnered with, Journey for Justice, KOCO, an organization out of Chicago, they were doing mutual aid work. And I'm, like, what is mutual aid? And then, when they were talking about they were giving out these food baskets and they were doing these things, and I'm, like, oh, that's the hip name for it now. [Laughter] Because we've been doing this for a very long time. And that's the thing, it's, like, until somebody makes it a popular name or a catchy name for it— but food insecurity has been happening for years and generations. This is not something new.

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Mutual aid to me is just the hip terminology. It's the new thing that you could look up. But actually food insecurity, food desert, this is what we've been living in at for a very long time, and I hadn't realized it. I didn't realize how many fast food we have versus healthy gardens. And the only reason I'm able to know a little bit more is because I've traveled the United States and I've been to places where they have gardens everywhere. But when you have never been shown that you don't understand the disparity that you're in. So when you come— somebody like me

that's advocating for green gardens, they're, like, "What's she worrying about?" They don't even understand what it means. And so for me, mutual aid is just a new term. Food insecurity, food desert is what we have, and we still have out here in New Orleans, especially New Orleans East.

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I think that it's not cared for the way it should be cared for. I think that it's the hip thing when somebody opens a nonprofit to just do it because it's the pandemic or it's the hurricane. I want to stop giving out diapers. I want to be able to stop giving out bread, but people are still hungry. It doesn't stop— the hurricane happened months and months ago. The needs did not stop when the hurricane dried up. It does not stop. The effects of that happens for many years after. But if I tell people I'm doing aid from Ida — "Oh, they should've been back" — who says people should be back? Who are we to say that people are— I can't tell you that. And so, yes, I'm still seeing the need for food here in New Orleans East.

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I'm still seeing the need for food, not just because of COVID, not just because of Ida, not just because of the pandemic, it's because of every day folks haven't had food. And so, yes, I can tie it to Ida, and I can tie it to the COVID, because it gives people a sense, I'm doing something because of that, but the reality is I've been running this organization since 2018. My daughter is twenty-four years old. I've been fighting food insecurity and food desert for over twenty-four years. I didn't realize it, that I've been fighting it for so long. I remember having a refrigerator full of food. I had just made groceries. And I remember over ten years ago a family coming to me and emptying it out because I thought that's what God wanted me to do was just give them

everything. It wasn't attached to Ida. It wasn't attached to COVID. It was attached to that family being hungry ten years ago.

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So what do we call that? What was that? What was the hip name then? So we've been doing this for a very long time. We've been feeding our community the best way that we know how. And when you look at health disparities, when you're looking at obesity, when you're looking at different things, it's attached to that because you eat whatever you have access to. You don't eat what you should, you eat whatever you get in front of you. So those are the reality of— if we look at food disparity, if you're looking at it, it's been happening for a very long time. So if it's mutual aid, if tomorrow they call it 101 help, whatever it is, the name, I've been doing it for a very long time. And I don't see people— I think there are so many pieces to the puzzle, but if we don't have healthy food, if we don't have— to nurture our body, how do we even fight for education if a child's sitting in that classroom hungry?

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How do we fight for jobs if a family don't have enough strength to even get up and go to work? Food and water are the basic things that we need. And I tell folks, especially my community, here in the United States you will die of hunger. In a third world country I don't think you will die of hunger. Because, I go to Honduras all the time. They raise chicken, they plant maize. And from maize they make tortilla, they make this, they make that. They can make bread. They have the resources. We don't have that. We can't have chickens running around. So there's survival

skills that they have learned in being poor that we don't have here because we live in the richest country in the world. [Laughter] And so I believe people here are dying of hunger.

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I believe people here really don't have food security. Where even the third world country they have really greater needs, and yes, they have stability because they don't have the jobs because they don't have the— but I think that they have the resources like land to be able to plant, to garden. That's what I loved, the Vietnamese community, they used their backyard to garden. I really loved that about this community, 'cause it's really blended, and we get to see a lot of that. If you drive around, you'll see all of these food garden in the backyard. And so that's what we need more of. I think we need more green spaces. The school that I work at, we have a garden that we grow things, and we give out to the community. And we need more of that. We need these federal buildings to start using their grounds and space to really look at the need of that community. If we start connecting these blind spots, then maybe we'll start working towards a solution.

Carly Berlin: I do want to loop back to the hurricane. Can you talk about just what Ida looked like for this community?

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You were talking about people from Houma, people from Tangipahoa coming here. But yeah, kind of paint me a picture of that time.

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: So I'm a survivor from Katrina, and in Katrina I had one of my greatest fear happen. My son heart had stopped. We had to evacuate, my mother, my daughter, and my son at the time. We were in the Superdome. We passed the nightmare, like, horrible, horrible nightmare. And I vowed to myself that I would never, ever use the city assisted evacuation ever again. Suffered post-traumatic stress. My son survived but it was very, very traumatic.

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So once I got married, first thing I talked to my husband was, okay, 'What is our hurricane plan? We have to have money. There's always— if we need to go to a hotel.' But him and I always decided that we would be the last to evacuate, that we would help our community. We would ask my mother to take the children so they could get to safe ground, and we would stay to help the community. For Hurricane Ida, at that time we were separated so I was by myself, but I had to make a decision and stick to my word that I was gonna stay behind. So he stayed behind even though we weren't together. He called me, he said, "We still keep our plan, right? We're still gonna help the community?" So I sent my daughter to evacuate with my son. They went to Alabama to stay in a hotel. And my mother, she won't leave me, so she stayed behind with her boyfriend. And the night that my children left all I could do was cry because we were getting the news that we were gonna get direct hit.

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And I was, like, okay, this is the time that we have to make sure our folks are safe. Because city had not put in effect a evacuation. They did not call it, so a lot of people stayed behind, especially in this community. And I know that my house is larger than most so I said, okay, this will be a shelter. And I knew I had some families that were in Kenner— there was a ninety-year-old woman, her daughters, I call them aunties, and I said, “Listen, y’all need to leave from over there. Y’all need to come here.” So I was, like, “I’m coming to pick you up.” And then I just did a Live and I said, “Anybody that’s in trailers, if you need to come to my house, please come. This is serious.” And people were literally listening to me. And I’m, like, “If you can leave, please leave. I know the city haven’t called it, but it’s supposed to be a direct hit. I lived through Katrina and I’m asking you to please listen.”

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And some people were just, like, “I don't have money to leave.” And so I said, “Start coming.” And there was, like, single women that, like, “Hey, my roommate left, can I come to your house?” “Yes.” “Ms. Cristi, I’m in a trailer. Can I come with my daughter?” “Yes.” “My husband’s with me.” “That’s fine. Come.” And thirty-seven folks showed up to my house. [Laughter] So I had chairs. We sat in a circle. We prayed. I took all their names, any medication that they need, I just started doing everything in case we ever had to just evacuate. After that, I had a school bus that was parked in front of my house for the school. It was a minibus. And I had the keys, and I had the key for the school, the code to get in the school. And so I was, like, man— there was a lot of people calling me, “Can you come get me?” And I’m, like, “Uh, the storm is about to come. You need to get to my house.”

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So after thirty-seven, I'm, like, this is it. I don't have enough space for thirty-seven folks to be here, but we could go to the school. So I called my boss, and I was, like, "Hey, can we use the school as shelter?" And he's, like, "Yeah, of course." I was, like, "Okay, good." "But I'm also gonna take the bus 'cause I can't move everybody back and forth in my car." And he was, like, "What? The bus?" I was, like, "Yeah." No plate, nothing. Mind you, like, he said, "I don't know anything about the bus, Cristi."

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: I'm, like, "Fine." So I literally got on this minibus that had no plate and started blowing the horn and started telling people, "If you need to go let's go." And I didn't realize how many trips I had done on that bus, but we ended up with eighty-plus folks at the school. And we ended up using classrooms for families. I know the lady that lives across the street, I call her auntie also, and just like Tía and her sisters and all their children were in one classrooms.

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And I used the nurse office as my private suite, 'cause it was the only room that had a refrigerator and I needed water. But we ended up with a lot of folks, newborns. It was, like, priority of women and newborns and children. And because they had a generator in the school that runs a little longer so when the lights went out, we still had lights. And we were there, but next door they started looting the businesses next door, so we felt that the kids weren't safe, so we would come back here during the day and would only use the school to go to sleep at night. After the storm hit, we had food that— we raided the school refrigerator. [Laughter] It was all

gonna go bad anyway so just, like, apples and oranges and breakfast sandwiches. Everything, we just ate it all up. And milk. And so, because of the connections that we had, folks were, like, “Cristi, World Central Kitchen can set up.” “Who’s that? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

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“Where do you want it?” I’m, like, “Well, put it in front of my house.” So we created a tarp area, and we were serving. They were bringing me enough for three hundred families a day, but we ended up serving— they were bringing us double. Whenever they could they were doubling it up, and it was going like crazy. Like I said, it was all of the victims of the storm. We would sit here, and we would have tarp and would just hang out all day and just talk and serve people and give people. And then people were just driving around from other state coming in at that time and they were dropping off supplies. And this house just became, like, combat center 101. [Laughter] But the city had some blind spots. There were some cops to make sure it was safe. And I’m, like, “We don’t want cops.” ‘Cause people didn’t come eat that day. I’m, like, “Why they’re not comin’ to eat today?” ‘Cause there was an undercover cop. Like, “I need you to leave.” “Why?” “No, I need you to leave. I don’t need security. I’m good. I’m Ms. Cristi. They’re not gonna do anything here.” [Laughter]

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But we were able to feed a lot, a lot of folks. That’s when the *Washington Post* came in. They wrote a story. We started getting funding. We were able to give some stipend back to some of these women that completely lost everything, their homes and everything. It was just amazing to

see. I think it was the first time El Pueblo was really recognized for the work we were doing. And I think even though we are recognized by our people, which that's all that matter, but to have people that, with every donation, every dollar, every fifty dollars, every hundred— I was crying. That was a day that I couldn't even go serve food 'cause I'm literally bawling because people were Zelleing, people were sending money, people were driving trucks. And it was so overwhelming because it was like I didn't have to worry about where food was gonna come.

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I didn't have to worry about the hygiene or the water, and the things that we needed. We were really getting what we needed at that time, and I'm just now running out of water. 'Cause we weren't given— just over-given. People were being, like, "I don't need water, I need this, or I don't need that." So that was the blessing through all of it, because hurricanes was my biggest fear, one of my things that I always felt like I would never be ready for. It was, like, I won. You didn't win. I got you. I know how to do this. But would I want to go through that again? Hell, no. But I'm glad that people knew that they could come here and get food. I think that's the biggest win, because people were coming here to get food that I never seen before.

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And people, they were, like, "Thank you, Ms. Cristi." "Ms. Cristi, we knew we could count on you having food. We didn't leave but we didn't have nothing." And it's not me. It's nothing that I'm doing. It was the collective work of these women that came together. One of those women that came and met me that day, she passed away shortly after we opened the organization, and I always call her our guardian angel. It's like, I could just be another community member not

doing anything. I could just be another community member, like, ugh, I got too much on my plate. I don't want it. Especially with three teenage boys. But that's what I'm mostly proud of is that I feel like I'm ready for another— we have five generators. I'm ready! [Laughter] We were sharing generators amongst people, and we became our first responders.

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I think that's when I realized— my roof got blown away in my house next door that I bought for my mom, and in one day, because we were feeding all the people, they went and put my roof back. I think I was the first— I didn't even have enough time to take pictures for the insurance because it was already up. [Laughter] And it was, like, wow, this is the power of people. This is the power of community. And I think the city failed us. It's not a surprise. They failed us for Katrina. But I really think that they're gonna move to this model of not evacuating. I don't know why. And I think they're gonna move to this model, because they think we did such a good job, of not providing the much-needed support, like opening shelters and these things, that I think it's going to come back to we're being our shelter.

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And so that's the reality of it. And so, when I started seeing people looting store, when I saw people looting hair store, I got really angry. You're looting hair store and shoe store? That's just being a villain. But when I see people looting supermarkets, people are not looting supermarkets because they think it's cute, people are looting supermarket because they need food. And so, if you were to open your doors of a supermarket and say, 'All of this gonna be counted in insurance anyway, let's give it to the people.' I tell people all the time, I fly all the time. During

the pandemic it was the most organized way to get out of the plane ‘cause they made you leave a row at a time. Not everybody could get up and push— like, it’s crazy.

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But sometime these systems gets created in a most— but we don’t keep it because we think everything is back to normal. But I think that if the city were to look at key points and just map out their city and map out where these real food deserts are at and really, really cared about creating— if you have all this property that’s overgrown grass that’s thoughtless, give it to the community so we could plant. Give it to the community so we can have food. Give it. There shouldn’t be all of this back and forth. Like, you’re not taking care of your property. We’ll keep it up. We’ll cut the grass. Just give it to the people. Trust the people to take care of the land. But people don’t think like that. They’d rather it go to waste. They’d rather it be overgrown. They’d rather it to be a hazard. New Orleans East is known for a place to dump bodies.

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We have over five or six women that’ve been dumped back here. But if those areas that these women body has been dumped were green areas where we were planting gardens, I could assure that we would not be seen as a place to come dump bodies. And so that’s the reality of it. This is where I live. This is the community that I live in.

Carly Berlin: I’m curious if you feel like the work you were doing during the pandemic kind of set you up for that— I guess I want to call it a success after Ida. I don’t know if that’s . . .

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: I think the work that I’ve been doing for the past twenty-four years has set me up to have these small wins in making sure— but I think that what I did out here in

the East has been duplicated in many other organizations. I'm just one of many. I think that some of the folks that help undocumented folks, we don't like to be in the spotlight because that's when we get target by immigration and other things and government and everything else.

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And so it's not about spotlighting what we do 'cause we get target. And so there's a lot of folks and lot of other organization that has helped the people. I see every weekend, every Saturday, every Wednesday where they're giving out food, the Greater New Orleans Collective, where they're giving out food for people, and it's by the masses. And if it's not for them I wouldn't have food every week for our communities. So it's still happening, and I think that there's a lot of folks that could be part of this story, a lot of folks that could share. And I think it's the least talked about. We're the least talked about. We're the underdogs that people don't— they'll talk about Catholic Charity, and they'll talk about all these bigger organizations, but it's the small ones that really makes the groundwork, really makes a difference.

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Carly Berlin: What are some of the hopes for the future of this work?

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: So the dream is that I am able to buy land, that I am able to buy different houses to create safehouses throughout the city and throughout the state. That the young people that I'm serving now become the leaders of this organization so then I can finally be in a beach somewhere and relaxing, and not feeling guilty every time I go out of town because there's so many things that happen.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: And that it won't need to be in existence in ten years because all of these barriers would have been removed. But I am almost sure that that's not a reality, that's just a dream.

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But I think that I can't worry about ten years from now, I gotta worry about next week and where those three-hundred families are gonna eat at. Because, yeah, I could dream, and it's beautiful to dream, but also reality is what hits me every day. So I need to make sure that we have, and we fight, and we keep fighting, and we have the strength, and we're able to pass the baton, and we're able to connect with other people. We're able to have these stories written so hopefully my great-grandchildren can hear my voice many generations from now. And just that, we want land. We want space. We want space to educate. We want immigration systems to be gone. We want food in America.

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We want hunger to end. I remember the 1980 Feed the Children campaign. We still have that. We're worrying about kids in Africa, but we need to worry about kids here, too. And so that's—when you look at it, a lot of things haven't changed.

Carly Berlin: Those were my questions, but is there anything that I didn't ask about that feels important to include or just any kind of final thoughts?

Cristiane Rosales-Fajardo: I think what I would like to add is that I am not an educated woman. I don't have a college degree in the sense of I sat down, and I planned all of this work.

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I am just a mom that saw a need, that was part of that need, and instead of sitting back and complaining about it I kicked ass, and I'm gonna continue kicking ass. And we were able to feed people. And at the end of the day that's what matters. It doesn't matter if your name is out there. It doesn't matter if your organization name is out there. It doesn't matter if you're a hundred-thousand-dollar nonprofit or if you only have, like, twenty dollars in the bank, it matters that when people were hungry, they knew to come to you, and you were able to support them. And with the support of all the folks that have helped El Pueblo NOLA with the smallest grain of rice, I am thankful and forever thankful for them. And that I will continue to honor this work and do this work until I'm no longer physically able to do it. And it's a privilege to sit where I sit to serve the people that I serve.

Carly Berlin: All right. I think we'll end there.

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[End]