



Abby Torrez

Royse City, TX

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Cynthia Torres: And we're recording now. My name is Cynthia Torres. The date is May 27th, 2022. We're in Royse City, Texas, and today I am speaking with . . .?

Abby Torrez: Abby Torrez.

Cynthia Torres: Abby Torrez. Abby, thank you for doing this interview. Could you tell me when you were born and just kind of talk a little bit about your early childhood and what that was like? Your earliest memories.

Abby Torrez: I was born in Lampasas, Texas, in the house of my uncle and aunt, and I was delivered by a midwife. I was born, like, two o'clock in the morning in a cold, freezing night. And what I remember is in Lampasas just going out with my dad to the pecan fields or trees or forests, I don't know what they're called, but we'd go out there as children and pick pecans so that he could sell 'em. They were, like, twenty cents a pound.

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And so we would pick so many just to make a dollar. So I do remember that growing up. And then, my mother always in the kitchen cooking. We always had a hot breakfast every morning and then going to school. And there was always fresh tortillas and beans and potatoes in the morning with scrambled eggs. But it was her desire to always make sure we went to school with a full stomach, waking up at five in the morning to start her day. And then coming home to a hot meal. And she was always so loving and giving and nurturing to us growing up.

Cynthia Torres: What did your parents do?

Abby Torrez: My mother, for the majority of her life, she-- early on in my young years my dad was a laborer so he worked the fields and my mother, to help with income, would pick cotton.

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And I do remember being dropped off at the cotton fields till it was, like, 5:00 p.m. and then we'd all head home and she'd wash up and start cooking dinner. We'd always have a full dinner. It wasn't like-- anything simple. Everything was made from scratch. So I remember doing that and working, just surrounded by fields and nothing but sand and dirt. Our parents raised our farm animals, so our chickens, goats, sometimes a small calf or a small pig. And that would be what they'd slaughter and freeze to get us through the winter months when my dad wasn't really working.

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So he basically, what I remember, up to the age of ten, he worked out in the cotton fields and my mother did, too. Then around ten, we moved to Irving, Texas, and he got a job working at a lumber company, and later we found out that lumber company is the one that distributed the lumber to what was then the Dallas Cowboys Stadium, which is no longer there. And I remember him driving us by there and saying, "You see that? That's where the Dallas Cowboys are going to play one day." And my brothers were huge fans and excited that we were going to have a football team. And we lived there for about a year and a half, and then from there we moved back to Lampasas and back to picking pecans.

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And we thought it was fun ‘cause we loved shelling ‘em and eating ‘em for our parents. And my mother would make candy with ‘em, which is like-- I guess it’s more like pralines but she called them something else. And so we did that and that, again, was short lived ‘cause then there was no work for him there, so we moved to West Texas. And in West Texas, again, he was farming land. We lived out on a farm, raised our own chickens and cows and pigs to feed so that we would be able to eat. And he would just buy the staple things that we needed like flour, beans, and rice and milk. And my mom, again, only in the summertime she did work out in the fields. Come fall and winter and spring she didn’t work, she was a homemaker, but always making our clothes, making aprons, selling salsa, just anything to help with the family.

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And just always loving and just a good soul. [Crying] So our life was really simple. My dad would give us a nickel a week and we’d save it to go to the convenience store and buy penny candy so we can bring it home. And life was just-- we weren’t rich by any means, but we did do with what we had, and we were very happy doing what we were doing.

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And my mother, she had struggled most of her life and you just couldn’t tell she had struggled ‘cause she took care of her kids, her family. And she helped my father raise two of his daughters that he had when they met because his wife had died during delivery of their third child. So they were, like, five and four, and my older brother and sister were, like, three and two. So they immediately had a family, a two-, a three-, and a four- and five-year-old. And then, three years

later, they started their own family which was six girls. And so total they had ten children they were raising, the four children they had combined, and then another six girls.

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So life was really simple. And I remember us going to Piggly Wiggly to go buy groceries and he'd ask us, "What do you want? We're on a budget. We're only buying this." And we'd always ask, "Can we get Doritos and Coca-Cola and bologna to make sandwiches?" So that was our treat. Because during the week it was just basically rice, beans, chicken, or potatoes. Rarely did we get mashed potatoes but mostly it was some form of potato soup she would make or potatoes. But we lived in a West Texas farm about three or four years.

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My father was an alcoholic all his life, from the time he was a teenager. And although we had good memories we also had memories of his drunken fests that he would have Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. But he was always working. He was a highly functioned alcoholic. We thought that was normal. And as we grew older he realized that we were, like, this is not normal. Yes, you feed us. We do go to school. And people would admire us because we were such a big family and well-dressed because my mother made sure that we always had on really nice clothes and looked presentable.

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And a lot of times she made our clothes. But behind the scenes we dreaded the weekend 'cause we knew my dad would just binge drink and he was just so verbally abusive to my mother. But then, come Monday morning, it's like that never happened. Everything was back to normal. And

we went on like everything was normal. We'd go on vacation. If it was on the weekend he didn't drink because we would be around other family, so he didn't dare present himself that way in front of other family members but with us he did. And as we got older we were, like, you need to stop. And we'd beg him to stop drinking. And my mother would beg him to stop drinking.

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And I think at one point I do remember being I guess about six years old, and we went out to a family get-together, and he insisted that my mother drink with him. And I do remember us coming home and my mother was very intoxicated, and we cried. My sisters and I were just-- we cried 'cause we had never seen her that way. No, I was probably about eight years old 'cause my little sister was about one. And we were, like, "Who's gonna take care of her? Who's gonna take care of her?" And my older sisters were, like, "We're gonna take care of her. Don't worry. Y'all stop crying. Mom's gonna be okay." And that was the beginning of what would be a hardship for us the rest of our lives, but her still accepting life that way and still being a good mom.

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She was never abusive to any of us, always loving and always welcoming people in the house, always cooking and trying to help where she could financially. And my dad was hardworking. He provided. He had money. We didn't have a huge house. We had always rented a farmhouse. But we were living what we thought was a good life, and I don't think that ever impacted us. It didn't me until as I got older and realized that he could possibly endanger our lives and I needed to do something about it. So at thirteen I learned to drive. I would take his car without his

permission and go out on the country roads and drive, run over cotton plants and you name it, what was in the way, but I was learning how to drive. [Laughter]

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And that was my way of thinking, I'm gonna learn how to drive 'cause one day we're gonna escape 'cause he doesn't want to stop drinking. And it wasn't until one event that we went out for a family get-together that he got behind the wheel and he was so intoxicated, and no one would stop him from getting behind the wheel with a family of six in the car. So I took it upon myself to confront him at thirteen and tell him, "You're drunk. You need to pull to the side of the road and let me drive us home." And him thinking I was pulling his leg, he said, "Then go ahead. You drive." I'm, like, "Okay. You get in the passenger side; I'll get behind the driver's side." And to his shock, I drove us home. [Laughter]

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But that was me knowing that he had us in a bad situation and I was going to survive, and I was going to make sure my little sisters were not gonna be victims and we weren't gonna die in a car with him. And I got us home safe. And there's other things. But growing up my mother didn't teach us to cook. We were her helpers. And I didn't learn to cook until I was eighteen or-- nineteen is when I married. And it was a big failure because I was always the assistant, never the cook. But I learned. I was determined that even though I had failed and embarrassed myself in front of my husband and his sisters that I would learn how to cook and never be embarrassed again, and I did.

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And going forward it was, like, oh, now she can cook. Let's go over at Abby's house and eat 'cause she can cook. And it's been that way since then. I'm not a professional but I just take pride in what I do. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: You have wonderful food. I was wondering, with all those kids in the house and everything and on the farm and with fresh fruits and vegetables and animals, what was your role? Did you have specific roles or whoever was available to prep? What do you remember, like, a specific role?

Abby Torrez: My role was really-- it was my two older sisters and myself and one of my younger sisters, our role was to peel the potatoes and chop anything up that needed to be chopped up, wash dishes as we're cooking. And the little ones would-- we would, hey, here are the plates. Go set the table so we can sit down and eat.

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So that was their role. And then, after dinner, we all took turns on whose turn it was to wash dishes and clean up. And one story that we still laugh about is we're all in the kitchen and my mother's making fried chicken and we want mashed potatoes. And my mother was a kid at heart. She had had a rough upbringing and had always been just a kid at heart. And with us there was always-- we'd have her chase us around the house and we'd play hide and seek with her. We played kickball and dodgeball, but she was going to be part of this. And we were always out in the country, and we had to entertain ourselves. So that one day I'm, like, "I'll make the mashed potatoes." And so I'm mashing them up with a masher and she's, like, "Don't do it that way. If you're angry don't do it." I said, "I'm not. I'm just mashing up the potatoes."

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Well, they were so hot that a piece of mashed potato flew and hit her in the face. No, it flew and hit my sister on the foot, and she kicked it and it flew on her face and it burned her. [Laughter] We laughed so hard, and she was hitting us with the spatula 'cause we wouldn't stop laughing. And we're, like, "Stop abusing us!" And she's, like, "Stop laughing at me!" And she laughed. And she was, like, "Get out of the kitchen." She said, "I'm gonna do this by myself and tell your dad you didn't help." I said, "No, we're helping. We're gonna stop laughing." But we thought that was the funniest thing because she slapped her face so hard to get the mashed potatoes off of there. [Laughter] And so, of course, we settled down. And then, another time, we're, like, "We know a recipe you can make us some tacos." Like at the restaurants would make the soft-shell tacos. And so she's, like, "Okay."

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And we'd always play at the table. My dad would eat first and once he ate he went to his room or the living room to go watch TV and we would play around, joking and things like that. And we were eating soft-shell tacos with ground meat and my sister was telling this story about when my mother-- the mashed potatoes hit her in the face. And at the same time I was going to laugh I inhaled a piece of meat and started choking. And my older sister jumps, "Let me save your life!" And jumps behind me and does the Heimlich and, of course, the piece of ground meat just pops out. I'm, like, "Oh, my gosh!" She says, "Remember, they taught us that in school?" And my mother's, like, "That's why you should not be playing at the table!" And as we're laughing about the mashed potato incident and I choked, she's, like, "It serves you right!" [Laughter]

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I mean, we had some good times. The time that they left us alone to babysit my younger nieces and nephews that were real little and they were, like, “We’re hungry! We’re hungry!” And we decided to make a big pot of oatmeal.

Cynthia Torres: How old were you at that time?

Abby Torrez: I was probably thirteen. So we made a big pot of oatmeal, and we served the little ones, and we were being mom and dad, me and my older sister and, like, “Y’all have to sit there.” Well, we had a little front patio, and we had a mean billy goat. He made his way into the house, and we could hear the thump, thump, thump, thump, ‘cause we had wood floors. And we’re, like, “What is that?” And somebody screamed, “It’s the billy goat! It’s the mean billy goat!” And his name was Chile [sp]. I think that’s what my mother called him, Chile.

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And so it’s, like, “Chile’s in the house!” So Chile the billy goat decides to come in and attack. And we’re all screaming. It’s ten kids under fourteen running around trying to take cover, screaming bloody murder and the two little ones decided they’re gonna hide under a blanket so the goat doesn’t see ‘em. And, of course, the goat jumps on the bed, tramples all over them, and when they emerged from underneath the blanket crying and screaming they were covered in oatmeal. So we had to figure out how we we’re going to clean the mess without getting in trouble with my parents.

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So that was a thing, but there was always good times on the farm, whichever farm we lived in. But most of our lives we lived out on the farm. And I always had a good time just cooking and my mother always having family come over and she'd feed 'em. She was known for her tortillas and her salsa. And when she'd make tamales it was like a whole production because everybody wanted to be part of the tamales because they knew they were gonna leave with a full tummy and a few dozen tamales with them. So that was one of the good things. And she lived to be seventy-eight and up till she was in her early seventies she was still making 'em and selling 'em. She just never stopped doing what she loved to do. I love cooking but it's not something that I would invest my time in as a business.

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But I do enjoy putting the love and passion into it when I know I'm preparing it for my family or my friends 'cause I want them to walk away knowing that they enjoyed every bit of what I made. And, like my husband says, compliments mean a lot, and I've yet to get a bad compliment.

[Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: It's interesting living the simple life and everything and still your mom putting everything together and loving that. It seems to me it would seem like a chore to have to prepare meals for all those kids day in and day out and everything and cleaning up and everything, but it sounds like it was more than just a chore.

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Abby Torrez: I think for her it was just because she did have a rough upbringing and was raised without a mom 'cause her mother died when she was two years old, and she became orphaned. I

think with her experience in life we were what she loved, and we were hers. And I know from personal experience that I've done the same, you know, divorced, struggling, four children. As a parent you're either gonna give up or you're gonna fight, and she chose to fight. I chose to fight to give my kids a better life. And she wanted us to have a better life than she did, which we did. Besides that my dad was an alcoholic she tolerated him because she didn't think she had other resources to help her, even though we would beg her as teenagers, "Mom, you have other resources.

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We can leave and then we're old enough to get a job and we can help you." But she stuck around till 1997 when my father passed away. And when I arrived at the house the next day, I'm, like, "Mom, how are you feeling?" "I slept good for the first time in my life. I slept all night." She says, "All these years married to your dad I don't ever remember having a good night's sleep." And she said, "But I was his wife so . . ." You know, she committed to being the wife and the mother. But she was at so much peace when he passed away, not that she was happy, just that life was different, and it was about her.

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So she ended up getting her own little apartment in Sweetwater, Texas. She was there a few years and she just enjoyed doing her thing, not answering to anybody, no kids. We'd go visit and, again, play games with her and chase her and do silly things with her, take her shopping. But she just had it rough, and she knew that, but she didn't dwell on it, didn't resort to other stuff or attempt suicide. She's, like, "I'm here until God takes me and I'm here to raise you guys until

you raise yourselves and have your own families, so I don't have to worry about you." And before she passed away, she did, she said, "I did my job and God says I'm not gonna be here for too much longer." Which they only gave her three months, but she was dying of kidney failure.

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And she said, "I'm gonna go with peace." I'm, like, "Yeah, you made your peace and that's okay. We're good." I wasn't good, but I had to be good for her.

Cynthia Torres: When did things-- going back to the first marriage and learning how to cook.

Abby Torrez: Um-hm.

Cynthia Torres: So you were driven, like I'm gonna be better.

Abby Torrez: Um-hm, yeah.

Cynthia Torres: So how do you develop yourself in the kitchen? What drove you? What tastes were you looking for? What kinds of . . . ?

Abby Torrez: Well, really just because I would ask Mother, "So how much do you put in this?" "You just eyeball it." I didn't know, what's "eyeballing" mean? I'm, like, "Oh, but what are the measurements?" And she's, like, "You just start small with the ingredients and build them up.

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And taste as you're cooking and if it tastes good then you're good." And everything's a simmer, nothing on high flame or high period. And when I went, "How do you make the fried chicken? How do you make it come out so good?" She said, "Salt and pepper, and cook it on a medium-high, but only put so much chicken in there." Which is true. They tell you you don't want to stuff

the frying pan or what you're using to fry chicken with lots of chicken because it takes longer to cook. You want it to cook evenly. So it was trial and error, and I just didn't give up. And once I mastered something, okay, well, I mastered it and moved on to the next thing that I wanted to master. And one of the things that I did master that I got rave reviews about was my beef enchiladas.

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And, like, "How do you make them so tender and so tasteful and make the beans just right?" But it was my own recipe, part of what my mom taught me and part of what I kind of picked up from other people. So I combined here and there to make it my own recipe and no one knew what my ingredients were, just me, because I wasn't gonna share it with the people that made fun of me 'cause I didn't know how to cook and now I knew how to cook. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: How did you know when you mastered a particular recipe? Was it the way it tasted? Was it the way it made you feel? What was it?

Abby Torrez: I'll say like my granddaughter, it kinda makes your body shake 'cause it's good. [Laughter] And I guess, mmm, it's good. So I knew. And I would always pay close attention to what am I putting in there? What am I doing?

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And there's things I make now that I don't even know how to put a recipe together because it's my own thing. And people ask me, and I do my best, but I can promise you I'm not being a hundred percent honest with the recipe because I don't know. Not intentionally but I just don't know exactly in measurements what I'm doing, so I'm just throwing it together.

Cynthia Torres: So how many folks were you cooking for regularly?

Abby Torrez: Early on it was just myself, my older son, and my ex-husband. It was just us three. And then, as the family grew, it was five of us. And then, towards the end, it was six. My youngest daughter, she was very young. She was only three years old when her dad and I separated so she didn't learn or get to taste really what I was doing 'cause by the time she was old enough Oscar and I were now married, which was in 1998.

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And she was only eight years old at the time. But my kids, I would always say that one thing, as a working mom trying to hold down two jobs and raise four kids, is that I would try to make things real easy and simple for me to help to feed 'em 'cause I knew they would be hungry once I got home. And so I learned to prep everything ahead and then instruct my oldest daughter, "Can you please do this at this time?" I would call, "Okay. If you'll start this right now and I'll be home in a certain time and then I'll finish it off." So she was always my right hand. She made sure her brothers-- she'd make 'em sandwiches, she'd make 'em scrambled eggs.

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She'd help make sure they were getting ready for school and her [older 0:30:08] sister was bathed. I never wanted to put that responsibility on her, but I had two jobs. [Crying]

Cynthia Torres: Things were different from your first marriage in your second marriage, so your second marriage was to Oscar and Oscar is the son of my father's brother.

Abby Torrez: Um-hm. You're cousins.

Cynthia Torres: Yes. Yeah. First cousins.

Abby Torrez: Yes.

Cynthia Torres: And so how did family life and mealtime change from one marriage to another?

Abby Torrez: By that time Amanda-- they were much older, and Oscar was a big help.

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My hours were always early in the morning and his were always later so it kinda helped that he was there to send them off to school while I was on my way to work, but then I was on my way home getting supper ready so he was still at work and would get home by the time dinner was ready. So he was a big help in whatever I needed, whether it was taking the kids to the dentist, to the eye doctor, or me having to leave because one of them is sick. And he always stepped in. So we always were a team. Until this day we're still a team. We do everything as a team. So it was a big help because the kids, one, now we knew we had stability again, where I wasn't struggling, working two jobs, and didn't have Amanda trying to be second mom.

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You see stories like that on TV and I'm, like, man, that was us. Especially like in New York you see the moms running out and rushing to cooking dinner and the kids, "Mom, mom, mom!" That was me. That was me as those movies. But I never felt the need to feel sorry for myself. I just moved and, like I said, Oscar was a blessing because there was a dark time before Oscar came into the picture. It was by the grace of God that I am here today, and the kids are here today, and Oscar is here-- we're all here today because things could've been a lot different. But sometimes

you do everything you can a hundred percent and sometimes a hundred percent's not good enough.

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And you sometimes want to just give up, say, well, how much more? Where do you find the strength? But you do. And to me motherhood was not, like, who's gonna babysit my kids? Who's gonna watch 'em? Motherhood was, that's your job. You brought 'em into this world, you're gonna take care of 'em, and I did. Somehow or another I figured it out. I can't tell you how I did now, but I know that I figured it out back then. And then, again, when Oscar came into the picture he was such a big help, and we're gonna do this as parents, not as Oscar the stepdad who he's just here 'cause we're married. No. He stepped in the role of fatherhood real quick. And sadly, in 2000 my children's father passed away suddenly so Oscar's response to that was-- he had had a heart attack the year before and he says, "I survived because I'm here for a reason. I'm here for the kids and for you."

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And he's always been there for them through thick and thin, through being in the delivery room to see the grandchild born, to feeding 'em, to changing diapers, to babysitting while me and the girls go out shopping. And he'd say, "Just bring me something back to eat." [Laughter] So that's how we would pay him. "We'll call you when we're on our way, Oscar." "Okay. Just bring me something to eat." [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: Was there a big change between what you were able to prepare in your first marriage versus your second marriage when things were more stable and more secure?

Abby Torrez: Yeah. I would say that it'd not be as stressed trying to feed the kids, but as far as cooking what I made didn't change.

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I want to go back to when I was single and trying to make ends meet. So my kids loved to eat the Taco Bell burritos, the combination burritos. I'm, like, "I can't afford that every weekend. I do good to get y'all McDonald's once a week." And so I was able to get paid every week with the two jobs, so I had money coming in every week. And I thought, "I can make those burritos. I don't need to go to Taco Bell." So I figured it out without asking Taco Bell. And there was no internet. You can't get a copycat recipe or nothing. And so I started making burritos, the combination burritos with beef and meat in there. And I remember the Cowboys were playing football that night and I was broke. I had a dollar to my name after buying stuff to make burritos. And I was, like, I don't get paid till Thursday so I'm good. I'm just gonna feed my kids. I've got gas in my car.

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And I made the burritos for everybody, and my brother was, like, "Are these the Taco Bell combination burritos?" I'm, like, "No. Those are my burritos." He goes, "Sister, those are just like Taco Bell if not better." And so those became my dad's favorite for me to make for him. "When are you going to make the burritos, [**mija** 0:36:21]?" I said, "You want me to go buy stuff to make burritos?" "Yeah." 'Cause, of course, he had really no teeth and he said, "Because I can eat those." But those were his favorite. The tortilla was soft. I'd still cook it and roll it up so that he could eat it. And my mother's, like, "Man, your dad loves those burritos that you make."

But I was just inspired because I'm, like, I can't go to Taco Bell and feed my kids what they want 'cause I'm on a real strict budget so I'll just learn how to make it. And that's what I did.

Cynthia Torres: Did they help out in the kitchen?

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Abby Torrez: They were my helpers. And not too much 'cause I was in control of the kitchen. I was in control of cooking.

Cynthia Torres: Kind of like . . .

Abby Torrez: My mother. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Abby Torrez: It was hard because my mother, like I said, we were her little helpers. We were her prep cooks. And my kids-- I don't want to say the kids, Amanda more 'cause she was like me, a little busybody in the kitchen with my mom, I'm trying to learn and she's trying to learn. But then she was like me, always giving my mom a hard time in the kitchen and playing games. And I'm, like, she's doing what I did to my mother and it's aggravating the crap out of me. [Laughter] So yeah, history was repeating itself.

Cynthia Torres: Did you all have sit-down meals or you just kind of did your own thing when you ate, or how did that work?

Abby Torrez: No. We had always had sit-down meals.

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And there was no eating in the bedroom. “I’ll come eat later.” “You better eat now.” And my kids are the same way. They all have sit-down meals to this day, all the grandkids, they’re not allowed to, oh, we’re just gonna go eat in the room. No. You need to come sit down and eat. Sit at table as a family. But we had always been that way, even with my first husband. ‘Cause my parents, there was a lot of us, and I’ll eventually show you some pictures of how we would all sit together, especially for dinner. Not so much lunch. Breakfast, it was staggered because I would get up early to enjoy my coffee and eat my breakfast and the kids, especially on the weekend, would wake up about nine or ten, and some would wake up at eight o’clock, nine, ten, or eleven, so I was making breakfast as they were getting up. So we never sat down as a family for breakfast.

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We hardly ever did. But we did for dinner definitely. We all sat down together as a family. Even now when we get together for Thanksgiving we all make sure we’re all sitting together, everybody eats at the same time.

Cynthia Torres: What did you all talk about around the dinner table, do you remember?

Abby Torrez: Just really how things were going and really never about work because I’ve always been one never to bring my work stress home. I don’t talk about work. That was never a conversation piece at the table. It was just about school, what’s going on, and the news. And Amanda always had a story about school. And it’s fun listening to the kids talk about school and their little friends.

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And even with the grandkids as they got older we'd sit down, "So what'd y'all do?" "Well, my little friend, you know what she said?" And so we're, like, "Are you gossiping?" "No, I'm not trying to gossip. I'm just trying to tell you what happened." So we always made it fun to be at the table. And it was never like you see in the movies where everybody's so quiet and the silverware's just clink, clink, clink. No. We're always, "Stop talking so you can eat! Stop talking so . . ." [Laughter] Growing up we were the same way and that's why my dad had to sit down and eat. And while he was at the table we would talk but we weren't cutting up because he was not having that. So once he got up from the table my sisters and I were laughing and just acting silly and stuff. And the kids, the same way, my kids.

Cynthia Torrez: With their families?

Abby Torrez: Um-hm, yeah.

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And I think now that they're older, the grandchildren are older so it's not so much because they got their own thing, their own friends. But when there's dinner and their parents put something together really nice for dinner if it's Monday through Friday or Saturday or Sunday they do expect the kids to sit down and join them for dinner if they're home. We always just had fun and it was never-- even when Oscar and I took care of my mom from 2004 to 2006 before she passed away and we'd still sit down as a family with her. And I'd come home from work, and I'd have to-- she was a very picky eater, so she was so used to her regular refried beans and rice and potatoes and tortillas, that's all she wanted. Or her salsa that she would make. And every once in a while I'd say, "I'm gonna go cook dinner."

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‘Cause the only reason I wouldn’t cook dinner is ‘cause I knew if I brought her a Whataburger with cheese she would eat that. Or if I made chili dogs she would eat that with a Coca-Cola and Cheetos Puffs. So that’s what she loved eating. So I’d tell Oscar, “I’m gonna buy dinner because she’s been real picky so I’m just gonna go get burgers for dinner ‘cause I know she’ll eat that,” and her fries with her orange soda. [Laughter] So she would have her Whataburger with French fries and orange soda. And another night I’d say, “Do you want me to make you some chili dogs?” “Yes. Make me two.” So I’d make her chili dogs and get her Coca-Cola. Or if I made burritos she loved it so she’s, like, “Yeah.” She would eat my enchiladas and my burritos. But it was just a little bit of what she would eat that she chose to eat but the rest was, like, “I’ll just eat oatmeal.” She was happy with oatmeal.

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And you’d give her a cinnamon roll-- she loved cinnamon rolls. So I always made sure I had cinnamon rolls for her and her strawberry oatmeal for breakfast.

Cynthia Torres: Why do you think her interest in food changed?

Abby Torrez: I don't know but she became very finicky and there’s just certain things that she decided, you know what? I’m just not gonna make it. I just want something real simple. And her breakfast when she lived by herself was refried beans, potatoes, and tortillas with salsa. That was her breakfast. She didn’t eat eggs, so she never had eggs for breakfast. So then, if she didn’t feel like having refried beans and potatoes for breakfast then she’d have strawberry oatmeal and a

banana. And if she wasn't having any she'd have a cinnamon roll and her coffee, but always coffee.

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And she was a tiny little woman, so she didn't have a big appetite to have a big breakfast or lunch. She was just real finicky. But if I made her the beef enchiladas or beef and bean burritos or chili dogs or bought her a hamburger she was on it. Or her treat for me was to get all excited was let's go to Dairy Queen and get you a coney, which was her ice cream cone. And "What do you want, mom?" "Just get me a coney." And I'm, like, "Okay. I'll get you a coney." And I knew that her ways had changed as she had gotten older. And I talked to Oscar, I'm gonna do whatever I can to make her happy, to let her eat what she wants to eat. And she's, like, "Not like when I go stay with your sister. She orders that Taco Bell and it's, like, raw tortillas." [Laughter]

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And the tacos with the hard shell, she goes, "Why'd they make 'em so hard?" Because my mother would fry them and they were soft fried, and that's how we would eat 'em. They weren't the hard shell that you get now. And I still do that till this day. When I'm in the mood for tacos I do my own shells and dice my lettuce and tomato and cheese and salsa. And Oscar will eat about six tacos if not more. [Laughter] But yeah, I still do that every once in a while. And I'll make the burritos because when we first got married I was, like, "I'm going to make my version of the Taco Bell combination burritos." And he's, like, "What?" And once he got a taste of it he's, like, "God, that is so good!" [Laughter]

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But I did what I needed to or get ideas to help feed my kids to keep ‘em happy. Like my daughter said one day, she said, “You know, when Dad and you separated and you went through your divorce I never realized how much you did for us and that we were actually at the verge of poverty because he was not helping, and how you managed to always have food on the table.” I said, “I made one pound of ground beef stretch. I was gonna make half of that pound, mix it in with the spaghetti sauce to make y’all spaghetti ‘cause I knew you loved spaghetti.” And then the other half I would mix it with elbow macaroni and put potatoes in there and then make that, which my mom would call [a **sopa** 0:46:56], and then refried beans and tortillas.

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So I was able to stretch that one pound to two dinners for them. And I would always make mashed potatoes with-- chicken was cheap to buy so I’d buy a whole chicken and I’d cut it so that everybody would get two small pieces with mashed potatoes.

Cynthia Torres: Now, just from growing up and developing your culinary tastes and everything with fresh fruits and vegetables or fresh ingredients, fresh meats and fresh dairy-- was it fresh dairy?

Abby Torrez: No, not so much. No milk or cheese. It was just basically the farm eggs.

Cynthia Torres: Has that shaped how you think about ingredients in your own kitchen?

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Abby Torrez: I love to eat fresh farm eggs and if it's fresh vegetables I prefer those. I don't care unless I'm making something that requires canned good, okay, well, then I'll get it. But for the most part if I can get and buy something fresh then definitely, yeah, I'll buy that.

Cynthia Torres: Because I've watched you cooking and everything and you just kind of pull things together and you're chopping and everything and it's just kind of like it's just so second nature. That knife is just a part of your hand and you're just chopping and everything like it's just kind of instinct now how you pull things together. But maybe it seems like it comes together fast but you really do take the time and the care to taste and to smell and to feel, and that's really interesting in the kitchen.

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I don't think a lot of people do that. I think they just put something in the microwave and then it's done, little Lean Cuisines and stuff.

Abby Torrez: No. My mother was the same way, and that's why it was so hard for us to learn to cook because hers was all, I'm gonna eyeball it and I'm gonna taste and if it's done it's done, if it's not, okay, I'm gonna add something to it. And that's the only way I know how to cook. And that's why I tell you when people ask me for a recipe I'm, like, um, yeah, I can put it together but I'm not really putting it together because I don't know the true ingredients measurements. I don't. I know what I'm putting in there, but I can't tell you it's a teaspoon, tablespoon, teaspoon and a half.

Cynthia Torres: And so how would you measure out salt?

Abby Torrez: Well, like I told you, I put what I measure a teaspoon and if you do it yourself you put it in the palm of your hand you make a little well and fill that well and that's a teaspoon. And that's how mother would-- everything went in her palm and into pan, into the palm, into the pan. And that's how I did it.

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And even when she would make tortillas she would put in the baking soda, she would put her four fingers in the jar or can of baking soda and whatever came up in those four fingers was her measurement for baking soda. And she always used lard to make the tortillas, so it was two handfuls went into there. And then half of a five-pound bag of flour. And then salt, which she just sprinkled salt in there. [Laughter] And her tortillas were amazing. But it was just measured-- the four fingers went into the can of baking soda, and she always had the big can. And, okay, that's little scoop, that's what I'm going to put of baking soda. And then two handfuls of lard, and then half a bag and they would come out perfect, soft, tasteful.

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That's what would wake us up in the morning, the smell of her coffee and her tortillas and refried beans. If it hadn't been for that we'd all be asleep till noon. [Laughter] But we knew, you want a good ol' breakfast? Huevos rancheros and papas and beans, you better get up. And my kids learned that, too. When mom's cooking we better get up or we're not gonna get it fresh. And then, they'd have to hear the lecture, "You should've gotten up early then if you wanted your breakfast." [Laughter] "It's not breakfast time, it's lunchtime. Make you a sandwich."

Cynthia Torres: When you make a meal now, now that all the kids are out of the house-- I know that Thanksgiving is kind of a really big deal here. Can you talk about why it's-- well, one, why is it important? Why is Thanksgiving important to you?

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Abby Torrez: Thanksgiving was one of the holidays that my mother loved putting together, and we're such a huge family and we had to put together, like, four dining room tables, too. Because people would come over, our extended family would come over, or my father's children from his first marriage, some of them would come over. And so at any given time there was probably about thirty people. So our traditional Thanksgiving was my dad always made sure he got the 25-pound turkeys, so we always had two 25-pound turkeys, the mashed potatoes, the green beans, and whatever other stuff she would make. We always had deviled eggs. And for me, when I got married and then I had the four kids, then I started doing my own Thanksgiving. We didn't go to my parents until the day after 'cause it was such a big production for her.

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And so I started my own I guess back in 1990 and [19]91, stopped going to my parents' house to have Thanksgiving. So I'd watch commercials, you know, the green bean casserole and there's a potato casserole. And I'm, like, I need to know how to make those 'cause I don't want just mashed potatoes and I don't want just green beans, I want the casserole. So I was always curious, so when I'd go to the grocery store I'm going aisle to aisle, okay, Thanksgiving, and let me look at magazines. And back then you didn't have internet, I didn't have internet so you'd go to

whatever magazine would give you recipes. And I'd buy the magazine and learn. And as time went on I'm making a potato casserole, a green bean casserole, rice and broccoli casserole.

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And then, I thought, I gotta make my dressing but I want to make it better than my mom's 'cause hers is kinda dry sometimes but it's good. So then I created my own recipe for my dressing. And forty years later it's still a hit. And Thanksgiving's my favorite holiday and I go all out, even though I'm just beat down at the end of the day. But I have put every ounce of effort that I got in my body to make appetizers, to make everything, side dish to go with the ham and the turkey, and desserts. I make my own desserts, whether it's pies, cakes, pudding, I'm making it.

Cynthia Torres: Why go through all that?

Abby Torrez: 'Cause that's gonna be my legacy. [Crying]

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My kids are gonna have that. So Amanda was, like, "Mom, you need to give us your recipe. Don't keep 'em in your head." And I said, "Well, you need to show up at the kitchen and learn." And she said, "Well, you always want to control the kitchen." I said, "Well, because it's my kitchen. You can take notes." And Prinisa and Amanda have both taken notes but ask 'em, where is that recipe? It's nowhere to be found. But I told her, I said, "You have to learn because one day this whole production is no longer gonna be here and you guys are gonna have to figure it out." And so, of course, it upsets them because they're, like, "Well, you're not teaching us now." "The door's open. You can come and learn anytime just like I learned."

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And last year I was recovering from surgery and Oscar was-- for 2021 he had COVID, and I was recovering from just having surgery. And Amanda did come and help me with the dressing. And she's, like, "I can't do this." She says, "You put way too much stuff in there." And she goes, "Do you really need the rosemary in there? Do you really need this?" I'm, like, "Amanda, that's what makes it. All those ingredients marry one another to become something so tasteful." And, "Do you really need to use so and so?" And I'm, like, "Yes. I'm not leaving any ingredients out. I'm not leaving out the parsley, the cilantro. Everything's finely chopped and dried so that it all goes in there." She goes, "I can't do it." I said, "Well, then you really don't want to learn how I make my dressing." But I season my turkeys, I bake one. I used to bake two but now I just bake one and either we get a smoked turkey or a fried turkey.

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But my baked turkey it's just fall-off-the-bone tender, and it does have the thyme, the rosemary, the green onion, the butter, the carrots, the celery. It's all stuffed in the cavity. And underneath the turkey it sits on a bed of vegetables. And the aroma of just all that combined when it's cooking and then you're basting the turkey, it's just so tender, and I do cook it on low.

Cynthia Torres: And how many people are-- like, when you have family over for Thanksgiving--

Abby Torrez: Usually twenty, twenty-one, 'cause there's nineteen of us with the kids or spouses and the grandkids. And then I have a friend that may come over that's single, and then my mother-in-law, Oscar's mom, will come.

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And that's basically it. In the past I've had more where I've had about thirty people in the house. And they're, like, how do you do it? And it's just we have to have rolls, we have the green bean casserole, we have to have the turkey and the ham, and we have to have the cranberry jalapeño dip to snack on prior. And then we have to the desserts. And at the end of the day the kids go in the pantry to get their to-go carriers, and everybody goes home happy. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: What does it feel like when you sit down to dinner with your family all around you? How does that make you feel?

Abby Torrez: Oh, it makes me happy.

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That is just so important and nowadays families aren't spending time with their kids, or the kids don't want to spend time with the parents. And we've always told them it's so important to always have those family values at the table because it's when it brings you together and that's when you spend quality time. No phones. Those aren't allowed at the table. You're gonna watch your iPad or your phone? No, put that away. And when we're together there may be a cell phone here and there but no one's on it, and the kids aren't allowed to be on their tablets 'cause we need to sit down and eat and enjoy our time together. But that just means a lot to have us together. And it's not often anymore 'cause, like I said, they have their own lives and they're busy with school, jobs, games, and they're just busy. But when we do get together-- here in the last two, three years it hasn't been like in the past where it was a big production.

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And I haven't even talked about Easter. Easter up until two years ago-- well, before the COVID pandemic hit, it was a big production, too. We had to have the brisket, the barbecued sausage, and the deviled eggs always have to make an appearance for Easter and for Thanksgiving. Other than that we don't have 'em. And the desserts and the potato salad and the pico de gallo and just everything. And then fill twelve-hundred eggs with candy and about two hundred of those have money. And we haven't done that in two years, so that's kinda broken my heart.

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'Cause I have twelve-hundred eggs in the attic! [Laughter] My Easter was, like, just seeing the little ones always together running and screaming and trying to find the eggs with the money. So there's, like, two-hundred dollars out there. And Oscar would say, "Do we have to do the confetti egg fight?" I'm, like, "Then it's not Easter!" And this year for Easter it was a small-- I think we had hamburgers and hot dogs and a little Easter egg hunt, and I think there was maybe thirty dollars out there for the kids to find, with the exception of my daughter hiding ten dollars and she found the eggs that she hid. [Laughter] And I think six confetti eggs were found. But in the previous year it's always been, like, I'd say twenty dozens of confetti eggs coming out and it's like a big mess, but that's the fun of Easter.

1:02:04

Cynthia Torres: Growing up in a big family and everything and your experiences and everything, what would you say maybe your top one or two things that you learned about yourself or about your family around the dinner table?

Abby Torrez: Really, I think more important to us was always see where we're at, how we're doing, and praising one another for the good things. And if you need anything we're here for you. And that kind of brings up conversation, especially with the grandkids.

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Their little certificates, and, "What did you do in school today?" "Well, I got so and so, and I got an award." You want them to express themselves and none of this silence with the phones or the iPads. For me growing up we didn't have access to any of that. So we just talked about school and especially my sisters and my mom, we'd entertain each other and laugh and tell jokes. And then Saturday night we knew that it was Saturday night wrestling so there would be an early dinner 'cause later on we would have popcorn and soda sit out with my dad and watch him drink and watch the wrestling match. So that was our Saturday. And then him upset if the Von Erichs lost. It was just fun.

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But we had our bad moments, but they didn't tarnish me like I would think it affects people. I can say that it did some in the family, just not me. Me, I was going to survive. I was going to be on top of things and not get drug under. But sitting at the table we always had a good time. There was no such thing as sad. It's always a good conversation. And even now with the grandkids if they come over and spend the night Oscar makes sure that he's interacting with them and asking them questions, and they're happy to answer. You don't get that look, like, we're not ready to talk. They're happy. And he interacts with them so that they want to know that we're interested

in what they're doing. And I don't know if you saw earlier when Joseph and Prinisa were here how Alex-- it's always about hugs, hugs, hugs.

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And when they were little they'd race to the door to hug me first, who was gonna hug grandma first. And then, Oscar was, like, "And what about grandpa?" "Okay, Grandpa." But they would literally almost stand in line to see who was gonna hug grandma first and then they'd go hug him. [Laughter] But to me I think that we've done good to keep the family together and keep those family values going and not lose them. Because I don't know that too many people actually have sit-down dinners anymore. It's fast paced and we're just in a different generation, a different life today.

Cynthia Torres: What would you say is your biggest family value?

Abby Torrez: Just quality time with the family.

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And I think I raised four-- or with Oscar's help we raised four amazing kids that are strong willed, hard-working, and we instilled the family values in them that they're still carrying on with their family. So I feel like we've done our job.

Cynthia Torres: That's wonderful. That's all I have right now. Is there anything else you'd like to share about yourself or about your famous recipes, about your kids?

Abby Torrez: Well, I don't think I have any particular recipe. Like, today we made that corn dip and there's a recipe there but it's not the real recipe. But that recipe has now made its way to lots

of other people that think they got the best corn dip recipe. Mine's the corn crack recipe because it's so addicting. [Laughter]

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Nothing mean meant about that but it's just every little thing has something that I take pride in. It's different. Whether I make my fish tacos, my ground meat tacos, or burritos, everything is gonna be good. Whether it's making menudo or chicken soup or making chili or making a turkey or enchiladas or carne asada, all that is just good. There's not one favorite. The only thing I have not mastered, and I will, is cod soup. That is the best and so simple. It has potatoes and cod and that's it, but the broth is just so delicious, and I have yet to master that.

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I want it perfect, and I haven't got to that yet. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: It really seems like your pursuits in the kitchen kind of reflect your inner pursuits, your just wanting to be the very best person you can be, your just wanting for meals to show that it's the very best way that you present yourself.

Abby Torrez: Yeah, presentation is everything to me. I walked in kitchens when they've invited us in and I'm horrified because everything is thrown together and I'm, like, that's not a good presentation. And I shouldn't say that but with me if you're gonna come into my house 'cause I invited you you're gonna be wowed. You're gonna be, everything's good. And so I have a friend of mine that came over three years ago and she's, like, her eyes were wide open the whole time.

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I'm, like, Christy, it's okay. She goes, "I've never seen so much food, so much everything!" And of course she walked away with tons of to-go boxes. [Laughter] I don't have a passion passion for cooking, but I do put passion and love into what I make, especially for my family and, you know, for my friends when they're over, and for you. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: Thank you. [Laughter] Very nice. Well, thank you, Abby. Thank you so much.

Abby Torrez: Oh, you're welcome.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah. This is wonderful. Well, I'm going to-- do you have anything else?

Otherwise I'm gonna--

Abby Torrez: No.

Cynthia Torres: Okay. Thank you.

Abby Torrez: Um-hm.

[End]