



Blanca Torrez

Brownsville, TX

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Cynthia Torres: My name is Cynthia Torres. The date is June 1st, 2022. We're in Brownsville, Texas, and today I am speaking with . . .?

Blanca Torrez: Blanca Torrez.

Cynthia Torres: And who is my aunt. And you are married to my father's brother, Johnny?

Blanca Torrez: Correct.

Cynthia Torres: Okay. So thank you for doing this interview. I'm really excited to record your story and to be a part of this project. We'll start off with when and where and what year were you born?

Blanca Torrez: I was born October 29, 1938, in Brownsville, Texas.

Cynthia Torres: Okay. And what was life like growing up? What are some of your earliest memories here? What was life like?

Blanca Torrez: What I remember is first of all my parents came from Mexico, my mother being from Monterrey Nuevo Leon and my father being from [**Pachuca Hidalgo** 0:01:02].

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And they came to the United States at a very, very young age and they settled here in Brownsville, Texas. And there was four kids in our family, my sister Ninfa and then myself, Blanca, and then two brothers, Cesar and Javier and all born here in the United States. And what I really remember from my family is that we were very poor but back then everybody was very poor, so it didn't bother us at all because we were all poor.

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I remember growing up and our meals were not very much sometimes. We didn't eat meat too often, but they were all the time homemade meals prepared by my mom. Back then the mothers didn't work too much. There was not enough work for everybody. My father used to work as a car salesman and he was under commission so if he sold a car he would get paid and if he didn't sell a car he did not get paid, so it was a little bit rough. But like I said, we were poor but us four kids grew up very, very together, very united.

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And I remember that we never had any fights. We got along real good. And as we got to be of school age we all started to school and my father's advice to all of us, he would always advise us that we are here to go to school and do our best and you are to finish high school. He always taught us that school was very important and at that time we weren't told about college.

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My father always pounded upon us that it was very essential that we finish high school so we would go into the working force. And one by one that's the way we grew up.

Cynthia Torres: What do you think brought you together as a family?

Blanca Torrez: Well, I think it was mostly my mother. She was very close to us, always trying to make us feel happy and loved. And she made sure that we ate. There wasn't too much food. I remember we did not eat meat too often, but we grew up eating the basics and back then it was mostly beans and rice and corn tortillas.

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Sometimes when it was possible we would get flour tortillas, but I don't remember eating meat very often. Once in a while if my mom had chickens, they would kill one and that's what we grew on, chicken, but not that often either 'cause we didn't have the chickens for-- we had them and then we didn't have them. It wasn't every day that we had chickens in the back yard 'cause we couldn't afford 'em.

Cynthia Torres: What were your family meals like? Did you-all sit down together or . . . ?

Blanca Torrez: Yes. In the morning our day would start off at 7:00, 7:30 and the usual, get up and do our faces and hands.

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And I don't remember too much about brushing the teeth, but we did have a little toothbrush and we might've done it often but not that often, sometimes. But then they would sit us at the table and back then whatever was on the table that's what we ate. We never questioned or we never imposed on our parents, we want this, we want that. No, whatever was on the table that's what we would eat.

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And that would be the morning meal, sometimes eggs, sometimes oatmeal, sometimes a corn tortilla with beans or a flour tortilla with beans. And it was tea or coffee sometimes and maybe sometimes milk. There wasn't too much for us to eat because back then, in the first place, we didn't have a refrigerator so there was no way of keeping-- my mom always kept a big chunk of ice in a box and that's where they would keep the milk and sometimes the butter but that wasn't too often. So we grew up on corn tortillas, flour tortillas, and coffee maybe or tea, and that was our daily breakfast every morning and then off to school.

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In those days there was no buses. Either they would take us to school, or we walked to school, and I remember that we were lucky enough to be close to the school, about a block or so away from us, so we did walk to school and in the afternoon we would walk back home. And always my mom would be waiting for us.

Cynthia Torres: What were your other meals like during the day? Did you eat at school, or did you take lunch with you?

Blanca Torrez: No. Back then there was no free lunch and there was no way-- I don't remember ever having a sandwich for lunch because there was nothing for us to eat but the basics, the corn tortillas and the flour tortillas.

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So I remember that my mom would go in her little car to school with homemade meals for lunch. Back then, like I said, there was no freebies, no free nothing. They didn't have cafeterias at school so there was no way of us buying any food there, or if they did have cafeterias at one point we didn't have the money. So the way we would eat is my mom would take lunch for us in the car and we would come out from school at twelve, walk to the car, and she fed us in the car and then back to school.

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And in the afternoon walking back to home and I don't remember having any snacks until suppertime. And suppertime it was the same thing, it was either rice or spaghetti, fideo, and

beans. In our culture and in our family every day they cooked beans. Every day we ate beans and that was what we ate most of the time.

Cynthia Torres: Do you remember at the table any kind of-- did you talk together as a family like what you were doing during the day or anything like that?

Blanca Torrez: Well, in the morning there was very little conversation. We were always kind of hurrying up for school and getting us ready to eat.

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But they would seat us together but we would try to rush it so we could walk to school. And for lunch we stayed in school and, of course, like I said, Mom would go and just prepare lunch at home, the basics which consisted again of beans and rice or fideo or sometimes it would be potatoes and maybe a little piece of meat, but that was not very often. And we all ate in the car. And in the afternoon that's when we would get together 'cause we had more time.

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By that time we all had little chores and our chores were to set the table and we would come home and sweep our rooms, keep our rooms clean and do the little dishes or go out in the yard and pick up papers or trash, whatever we saw that was not supposed to be in the backyard. And we were always doing something, and we were always a very close-knit family. No fighting, no yelling, no bad words. It was just calm. And after dinner, well, we didn't have a TV and so it was just basically showering and going to bed.

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But before that our parents always says, “Homework time, homework time.” So we had to do our little homework before we even hit the bed.

Cynthia Torres: When you sat down to dinner is that when you caught up as a family? What was the conversation like at the dinner table?

Blanca Torrez: Well, my father would always say, “Well, how was your day in school? What did you do? Did you-all have fun? Did you do your work? Did you mind the teacher?” And we would always say, “Yes.” Back then I remember that the teacher was always in command. Whatever the teacher would tell us that’s what we would do.

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We never questioned or we never got out of line or yelled or screamed. At the school, the classes, the rule was anything you need you raise your hand. So we were pretty well trained that anything we needed we raised our hand, and she would come to us and assist us and help us out.

Cynthia Torres: Did your parents kind of have that role at home, like you minded your parents and everything and learned from your parents or . . . ?

Blanca Torrez: I kind of think that in their time it was different. It was different because it was a harder time for them.

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And I think it was a little bit different because it had to do with that they were poor so there’s not too much you can do when you’re poor ‘cause there was nothing. Any toys or any things that we had were homemade. They weren’t store bought. We never went to town or anything. It was just

we were always home. And I guess for them it was a little bit tougher because they had to learn how to do fun things with what they had, and they didn't have much.

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But yet they managed to have fun. It was mostly games. I remember playing games, “[The
0:16:11 rover, the rover, let Blanca comes over.” [Laughter] It would be fun. We played with marbles. We played with jacks sometimes.

Cynthia Torres: You said you had your little chores like setting the table and washing the dishes and everything, so you each had your assigned chores. Did you help your mom with the cooking at all?

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Blanca Torrez: Well, when I was growing up we always helped out but in the kitchen it was strictly serving. We were younger and we weren't allowed to go in the kitchen too much for the real cooking until later on. But while we were growing up it was just making sure that there was a place for everybody and set out the little table and dishes and just sit around and wait. My mom would be doing all the cooking and the serving.

Cynthia Torres: When did you start helping out in the kitchen, about what age?

Blanca Torrez: I think I was around going from maybe ten or eleven. That's when I got introduced to the cooking beans in a [jarro 0:17:53], and a jarro is a pot made out of clay.

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And you would measure two cups of beans and then you would clean them. Sometimes they had little pebbles, cleaning the beans. You always had to clean them out 'cause they always had little

pebbles and those pebbles they didn't go with the beans, so we made sure we pulled out those. And then rinse the beans, rinse them real good, and then put about-- the pot was kind of three-fourths full of water and then we would drop the beans. And my mom always said that we had to put a little bit of garlic and some salt and then cover.

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And those beans, usually we would cook 'em about two-and-a-half hours. When I was growing we were lucky that we had a stove, and it was a gas stove. And while my mother was growing up it was different. There was no stoves. It was just fire, homemade fire and that's how they would do their cooking out in the yard, wherever. And when we were growing up, no, we had a real stove and it had four burners. And one would be for cooking the beans and then the other one was always for cooking a skillet of rice, white rice. And if it wasn't rice it was mostly-- all the time it was spaghetti, fideo.

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And like I said, once in a while it was a little piece of meat with potatoes. And every day it was homemade tortillas, either corn tortillas made out of real corn and then making your tortillas and cooking them in a little flat skillet.

Cynthia Torres: How did you make the tortillas out of real corn?

Blanca Torrez: My mom used to cook the real corn from the cob, and they would cook it and back then they would put salt and something else.

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In Spanish we call it “cal,” a white powder. I don't remember right now what cal is in English but cooking the corn it had to have cal. It was a white powder. And then you let it cook until all the water would disappear and then you would put all your corn in a metal thing and something where you would mash all the corn, mash, mash, mash, and then it would become a masa, a dough. And then you put a little bit of salt and maybe a little bit of shortening and then you start making little balls and then you make your homemade corn tortillas.

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And you make ‘em by hand and then set ‘em on the skillet and once you see the underpart of the tortilla kind of a little bubble that’s when you flip ‘em. They were good. We always had those corn tortillas. And those corn tortillas you can eat anything, anything you can eat with corn tortillas. And if they’re homemade at home like everybody used to make ‘em home-- we couldn’t afford to go buy ‘em at the store so everything was homemade and everything was very good, very tasty.

Cynthia Torres: What was your favorite meal?

Blanca Torrez: My favorite meal in the morning was a flour tortilla with beans.

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And up to now, I’m eighty-four and I’m still-- I don’t eat ‘em that often but my favorite breakfast is a real good homemade flour tortilla with real good homemade beans, and that’s my favorite for breakfast, my favorite meal.

Cynthia Torres: So did you learn to cook from your-- so you were eleven years old when you started to help out in the kitchen, did--

Blanca Torrez: Yeah. Back then since we didn't have too much to do us little girls, my sister and I, we were always helping out. Either we were in the kitchen helping my mom or sweeping, cleaning our rooms. And we were always sweeping yards, too. Back then there was not too much grass or too many plants or anything.

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We had a few plants but not too many, but our little chores revolved around cleaning all the time. And that's the way we were brought up. We never went out. I don't remember going out too much on vacation. I don't remember going out too much to the movies. We were always home, but that's the way it was with all of us. Everybody was poor but back then we didn't know we were poor. We didn't know, but everybody was poor. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: So did your brothers learn to cook?

Blanca Torrez: My brothers, no. They were more into the yard. My brothers did the trash and picking up trash.

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And if there was weeds around the back yard, front yard, wherever they knew that they would pull 'em out. Back then we always had those red ants, too, [problems with the 0:25:12] red ants.

Cynthia Torres: Oh, fire ants?

Blanca Torrez: And when they stung you it was painful. So my mom always used to tell us, "Don't get close to those red ants because it is painful." So the way we would get rid of 'em was whenever they changed the oil in the car the old oil was collected in a big round pan and then that oil, we put it in the hole where the ants were in. Next day there was none. No ants. They

would pop up somewhere else maybe in the next yard, next neighbor, but those ants disappeared with the black oil.

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Cynthia Torres: Was there a time as you got older where the meals were left up to you and your sister?

Blanca Torrez: Yes. When we got older my father was always trying to-- he worked but not all the time. He was always looking, and we knew that in the evening we were in charge of the kitchen. And we knew, we weren't told, or we weren't screamed at, do this and do that, no. We knew that they were working, they were looking for work. Mostly my father.

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My mother was home with us, but we knew that when the evening came, closer to the evening, that my sister and I we have to have something ready for all of us to eat. And mom was always trying to pitch in, trying to help us learn. And she was very good at-- she didn't want us to get burned or spill the oil or spill something hot. She was always there checking on us so we could do things right. And that's the way we learned. No questions asked, we just pitched in as much as we could. But I don't remember ever getting screamed at or punished. My mom never punished us.

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My dad was a little bit harder on us but not too much. But there was never any bad words or screaming, no. We sit down and we just talked about everything that happened that day.

Cynthia Torres: That's good.

Blanca Torrez: Um-hm.

Cynthia Torres: When the cooking was left up to you and your sister how did you know that you had the recipe done right? Was it the taste or . . . ?

Blanca Torrez: Well, since our meals were very basic we knew that the beans had to be checked every so often 'cause we couldn't-- if we did check on beans and the water was all disappeared or evaporated they usually burned, and you can smell.

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Once your beans get burned they don't taste good, so we were always checking to make sure that there was enough water in that pot because we knew that burned beans didn't taste good. And then, for the rice, the rice was very easy 'cause we learned from an early age that the rice cooked between eighteen and twenty minutes and you always have to cover it and then simmer. You can't cook rice with high flame. It's got to be simmered. And if you cover it and you check it at eighteen or twenty minutes you'll see that it's all done, and it has a good taste.

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And my mom always instructed us to have a good pot of rice we always had to use garlic, onion, and tomato. And if there was green bell pepper always put a little bit piece of green bell pepper in the pot once you cover it and you put your spices in the skillet and put the water and you bring it to a boil, and then you cover it and simmer it for eighteen minutes, twenty minutes, your rice is perfect.

Cynthia Torres: What spices did you use?

Blanca Torrez: The spices back then consisted of garlic, tomato, onions, and when we had the bell pepper always the bell pepper.

Cynthia Torres: Okay.

Blanca Torrez: Those were the basic ones.

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And up to now I still cook the same recipe and it still comes out real good.

Cynthia Torres: At what point did you-- when did you move out?

Blanca Torrez: From my house?

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Blanca Torrez: Well, we grew up and we all went to high school and the rule was that we were to finish high school and immediately after high school find a job. That was always told to us by our dad, “You need to finish your school. You need to finish high school and then you go to work.”

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So I finished school at eighteen years old and the reason I was a little bit older than the rest of the kids is because when I first started school I started at a Catholic school, and we did not talk English. And in Catholic school they taught English, but they didn't push you to practice it, to talk it, to converse in English. Our conversation was all Spanish. Then we moved and we go to a public school so when they tried to register my sister and I the principal, an Anglo beautiful lady, her name was Lena Furstenberg, a beautiful teacher, she took us into a room and she says,

“Okay, read this book.” And they found out that we couldn’t read too much. Our English was very limited.

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So I was in the second grade at the Catholic school so when we moved, and they moved me into the public school and we went through this principal’s testing, she decided that we had to start all over. So I went from second to first. And back then it was first and then high first. That’s another year, and then second. And the reason that they did that with us, me and my sister, is because our English language was very limited. But it wasn’t our fault. We went to school for two years, but we never learned the English language too much, so when they tested us they knew that we couldn’t converse in English or read too much English, so they turned us back.

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So I lost two years of school there. So I was eighteen going on nineteen when I graduated and I lucked out because I went to school through my elementary, through my middle school, junior high school, and then on my senior year-- it was from the ninth grade to twelfth-- on my senior year one of my counselors suggested to me that I was a very good student, that I was in band, and I had accumulated a lot of good credits and that I had a very good chance of finishing high school in three years.

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And she says, “Would you like to finish in three years, Blanca?” I said, “Sure.” So my year that I was supposed to graduate was 1959 but because of the accumulated credits that I had and good grades I graduated in July of 1958. And as soon as I graduated I went to work.

Cynthia Torres: Where'd you work?

Blanca Torrez: I went to work.

Cynthia Torres: Where did you go to work?

Blanca Torrez: I got hired at a five and ten cent store and I started there, and I really liked working there. I was in the men's department trying to help out all men.

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At that time what was in style was the khaki pants. Everybody was buying khaki pants back in the [19]60s and so me being with the men's department I got to measure all the men, and the men liked that. They thought I was hugging them, but I really was doing my work measuring their waist. [Laughter] Everybody wanted-- "I want Blanquita, I want Blanquita," because they thought I was hugging them but really I was just measuring their waist. And I sold a lot of khaki pants, a lot of 'em. [Laughter] And then one day I saw an ad in the paper that they were looking for a cashier at Edelstein's, a very well-known furniture store.

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So I applied and they hired me. My manager from the five and ten store, she said, "Blanquita, I already had plans for you. I was going to move you to the office. Please don't go." And I says, "Well, I'm sorry but I already accepted this job." I was earning fifty cents an hour back then selling pants and then I started working for the furniture store and they offered me thirty dollars a week. I says, "What? I'm gonna be rich!" [Laughter] I got so happy I couldn't even sleep thinking thirty dollars a week! That's a lot of money! And then they said that they were gonna pay me every two weeks, so it was sixty dollars. I freaked out.

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I was so happy that I was getting sixty dollars every two weeks. And back then all the money that I made working [inaudible 0:38:11] I would turn it in to my mom and my mom would give me five or ten for my own spending, but everything went to her.

Cynthia Torres: So before you had very basic meals and so now you're bringing in more money. Did your meals change or how did they change?

Blanca Torrez: Now we had jobs and then my dad was getting stamps and my mom was working a little job that she had.

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Poor thing, my mom could play the piano, so she gave piano lessons at five dollars a month. Back then it was a lot of money. But these piano lessons were out of town. We lived in Brownsville all our lives, but she traveled to Mercedes and Weslaco. That's between thirty and fifty, sixty miles away. And she was getting a little bit of money. And my dad was approved for stamps, so our lives changed. Now my mom and dad would go buy groceries, more groceries.

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We got introduced to milk, to the vegetables, to lettuce, tomato, all of that stuff that we hardly ever had when we were growing up.

Cynthia Torres: And meat?

Blanca Torrez: And meat and fish. So it was a variety.

Cynthia Torres: And cheese?

Blanca Torrez: And my mother was always home, and she always cooked.

Cynthia Torres: And cheese?

Blanca Torrez: Yeah, cheese. I remember we would get it from the government. Once a month they would give us a big block of yellow cheese and a block of-- it looked like lard or shortening but actually it was white and then it came with a little pouch. And you opened the little pouch and put it in that white chunk of-- it looked like lard with a little pouch.

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You opened the pouch and you put it in, the little white block, and it turned yellow and then you tasted it, and it was butter. So then we got introduced to pancakes and sausage, so it was different. And I was seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. I got married at twenty-two but by then I already knew how to cook. I knew how to cook the beans. I knew how to clean house and I knew how to wash by hand.

Cynthia Torres: Everything.

Blanca Torrez: We had a washing board and when we were growing up it was mostly by hand, and you would have big tubs of soap and your washing board and then another big tub full of clean water.

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You would wash and rinse and then you would go hang up on the clothesline.

Cynthia Torres: And you had three children?

Blanca Torrez: I got married and, yes, I ended up with three children, two boys and one girl.

Cynthia Torres: And how did your meals change so now that your life had changed considerably?

Blanca Torrez: Yes. By then I was working, and I was getting money, not too much money but enough money to get us through. And our meals got to be better. And once a week my husband would treat us to go eat out.

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And the one thing that is very outstanding in my mind while I was early in my marriage is going out for a meal on a Friday and they opened a place called Luby's and they had good food. Man, everything was so good! So that's where my husband would treat us on a Friday afternoon. And we could pick. And there was one rule, every time we were taken out to dinner for Luby's my husband would say, "Remember, don't overdo it. If you choose a food you have to eat it. If you want more we can go back in and get you some more but don't overdo it." Because I know the first few times we had big eyes and we picked and picked, and it was just too much food.

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But then my husband says, "No, no, no. We're not gonna do this anymore. You can pick out your meat, your vegetables, and of course your little dessert but only pick what you are gonna eat. Now, if you're still hungry when you finish and you want to go get something else you're welcome to do so but don't overdo it."

Cynthia Torres: Don't waste.

Blanca Torrez: Don't waste because it's not good to waste money or food.

Cynthia Torres: And your kitchen, was it kind of in your household, as a parent, was it run similar to the way you grew up where everybody had chores and set the table?

Blanca Torrez: Yes. My three children, they were little but as they were growing up they knew that they had to do their own bed, they had to pick up their shoes.

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And every night they took a bath, and the rule was the towel never goes to the floor. You take a bath and you come out and you dry yourself, but you hang it. Never leave it there, especially if it's wet. Never leave the wet towels on the floor. And basically the way I was trained that's how I trained them.

Cynthia Torres: And in the kitchen?

Blanca Torrez: And in the kitchen at the beginning they were little, but I didn't make them or force them to do anything until later, 'cause I know Johnny would be going on six and we started teaching him about doing your own dish and picking up-- at the beginning it was just we eat and then pick up your plate and just put it there by the sink or the washing area.

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But then later on it's you eat and then you go to the sink, and you do your own little dish and fork, whatever you used, and it was easier for all of us. And then, by the time I had my kids, yes, we had one TV. So we always enjoyed the evening stories, the Brady Bunch and Popeye and Olive, the cartoons. Yeah, we did all of those things. But this was much later on when I had the kids.

Cynthia Torres: Did you-all eat together like you did growing up?

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Blanca Torrez: The one meal that we used to eat together was the evening meal because the morning meal my husband always left early, and I always packed him lunch. And sometimes he would eat breakfast, sometimes he just did not, but I would have to fix him breakfast sometimes and I would have to pack him a lunch every day.

Cynthia Torres: So in the evenings you-all sat together for dinner?

Blanca Torrez: For dinner, yes.

Cynthia Torres: What was that like? Did you--

Blanca Torrez: By 6:30 or 7:00 we would eat, all of us together. And the same rule, we talked about how their day went and what they saw in school or any news that they heard in school. And mostly it revolved against-- Johnny was in band. Oscar wasn't in band.

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And Ceci was band. So it was just talking about how their day went and if there was any excitement going in school or mostly something about--

Cynthia Torres: Was it fun?

Blanca Torrez: Yes, it was fun. And I know my eldest son, he played baseball, little league, when he was a little tiny tot, and it was fun going to watch him play. And then Oscar and then Ceci. It was fun while they were young. We had fun.

Cynthia Torres: What were some of the things-- did you prepare similar meals to when you were growing up? I remember the fideo.

Blanca Torrez: Yes.

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Our meals were pretty much the same they were when I was growing up. I kept up with the corn tortillas. I kept up with the flour tortillas. And our time was a little bit different. We had mashed potato. We had corn patties. We had tuna. Those things we never ate while we were growing up. We never had tuna. The one thing that we liked but we didn't like too much were the sardines. [Laughter] They were stinky. Sardines we would eat, but basically there was more meat and more fish and more chicken and tuna patties.

Cynthia Torres: But did you make your own corn tortillas?

Blanca Torrez: Yes. Corn tortillas up to now I still have my-- and now I buy the Maseca.

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It comes in a little bag, two pounds I think, at H-E-B and I still make the same recipe. It's just put one cup or two cups of masa harina in your bowl and two cups of hot water and work with it. And I usually put a little squirt of oil, Crisco oil, whatever oil I have and a little bit of salt. But now I don't do the handmade tortillas. I have a tortilla maker and it's fun. All you have to do, you have two plastics and do your little ball, fix your little masa from scratch from the Maseca bag. And the trick to this masa is you prepare it with hot water, a little bit of oil and salt, and you work with it, work with it until it becomes smooth, and you form a ball.

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And then you cover it with a kitchen towel and let it rest five or ten minutes and then you make your little balls and then you put 'em in the tortilla maker between the plastics and they come out

real good, very good. I like doing those from scratch. I have a corn tortilla maker. I don't make the flour tortillas too often because nowadays we've graduated. [Laughter] None of my friends do homemade flour tortillas at home anymore. We go buy 'em because they're so good, they're fresh, and they taste just like homemade, so why make 'em at home?

Cynthia Torres: What's your favorite brand or how do you buy them?

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Blanca Torrez: The brand that I've been buying since I buy everything from H-E-B is called Mi Tienda, My Store, and there's twenty tortillas for about-- right now they run, like, \$2.28 for twenty tortillas. And they're not cooked, they're raw. And they come in plastic, and it's called Mi Tienda, My Store. So when you bring 'em home you put 'em in the refrigerator and then when you want one or two flour tortillas you open it and just put it on the hot griddle and cook 'em. And they taste just like homemade, so why go through all the trouble of making dough and lard and this and that? Besides, my hands are now [plus 0:52:49] a little bit deformed because of my rheumatoid arthritis and I can't do the real masa. I can but it hurts my hands a lot. So every time I want a flour tortilla I go to H-E-B and get me one of those packs, \$2.28 for twenty.

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And they keep very good in the refrigerator. They don't spoil. And they're fresh and they taste like homemade.

Cynthia Torres: I want to go back a little bit like to conversation around the dinner table, like when your family was together. I remember a little bit about conversation around the dinner table and just learning about who is Tía Nimfa or who-- I got an introduction who the family was and-

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Blanca Torrez: Okay. My actual family from way back consisted of two sisters and two brothers. My oldest sister's name was Nimfa. She's now eighty-eight years old.

0:54:02

And then me, Blanca, eighty-four years old. And then my brother Cesar, four years younger than me. He's already passed away. And then four years after Cesar came Javier, my youngest one. He's seventy-six.

Cynthia Torres: I remember when people were getting together and families, like, there were a lot of times you sat together at the table and everything, but then there were, like, family gatherings where you would gather for the barbecue, and you came together. Those were always a big-- where the families got together.

Blanca Torrez: Yeah.

Cynthia Torres: Those were fun.

Blanca Torrez: Our memories up to now-- my actual family, I have three children, Johnny, Oscar, and Ceci.

0:55:02

And growing up we grew up with our school friends. I know Josie and Monche from school. I know Joe and Lydia from school. And who else? Oh, G.I. and Celia from school. And we were all together back when we were growing up. We graduated almost at the same time. So then we got married and we still kept being very good friends and so we started having our children. And for the longest time, many, many year in, year out our functions were-- I had three children, Lydia had two, Sonny had two.

0:56:02

There was another couple, cousins of ours, Sonny Garcia and Elvia.

Cynthia Torres: They were family.

Blanca Torrez: Yes.

Cynthia Torres: They're related, yeah.

Blanca Torrez: Yeah, three in their family. And Joe and Lydia, two. Josie was not in the family but since we have known them for so many years--

Cynthia Torres: They're family.

Blanca Torrez: --they're family. They had three. The funny thing around our relationship is we all ended up with three kids, two boys and one girl. I had two boys and one girl, Josie had two boys and one girl, Sonny had two boys and one girl, Joe and Lydia, they were different. They had one girl and one boy. And Celia had one boy and one girl. And we were so close in school that we kept our friendship through our marriage.

0:57:00

And the rule or the-- not the rule, but we were so close that we always ended up being together for all holidays and birthdays. Anybody had a birthday we would all go. Anybody had communion from church or confirmation it was time for a party. And it was always the same people, so we grew up together, these four or five couples, for many years.

Cynthia Torres: But it was around food. It was always, like the barbecues and I remember the [inaudible 0:57:50].

Blanca Torrez: Yeah. When we got together it was always barbecue and it consisted of the same thing year after year after year, fajitas, chicken, sausage, rice and beans, and tortillas.

0:58:03

And of course we and the children always did the regular beverages, sodas, and the men, they always had the beer.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Blanca Torrez: But we all got together for so many years and we had such a good time every time we got together. There was no cussing. There was no screaming. The kids would run around all together and they were never fighting. They always had a good time. And we were always together in Easter, in Christmas, for birthdays, for Fourth of July, for Memorial Day. We were always going somewhere, all of us, the same group, and always the same diet, the same basic food, fajitas, chicken, rice and beans.

0:58:59

And that was-- everybody knew. [Laughter] And of course your drink. And in the summer we always hit the watermelon, that watermelon. It was fun. It was a lot of fun for the many years. Now everybody's kind of isolated because we're older and some of us are not here anymore. Some of them passed away and we miss 'em but we still remember when we see each other all we talk about is the good times that we had and the eating and the staying out and playing chalupa and playing baseball and the getting together with the kids. Going out for little league and going out to vacation with five couples and all the kids, it was quite a bit of an experience, and it was fun. We always got lost. [Laughter]

0:59:57

We always got lost but then we managed to find ourselves. It was fun, a lot of fun.

Cynthia Torres: When you think about-- I'm trying to find a way to ask. My mother was a from a different-- it wasn't a Hispanic family and everything, but it can be disconnected. People didn't really gather or sometimes the food was just eaten in front of the TV and people didn't talk and don't really know them very well. What are some of those life lessons that you learned from having simple meals and coming together at the dinner table?

1:00:59

Do you think that that helped raise-- I feel like it helped raise families that were closer, that help you learn how to work out your problems sometimes at the dinner table.

Blanca Torrez: I feel that all getting together, Cindy [inaudible 1:01:17] that we knew that if we encountered a little financial problem or family problem or a death in the family that it helped us, that togetherness helped me a lot and I'm pretty sure it's helped the rest of 'em, that we knew we could get together and just be together for when we were sad and compare notes and give each other good advice when we needed it.

1:02:00

And there was times where financially we all pitched in for something and we knew that we could go to our friends, to our family and talk about the problem and forever they would be there. Forever. And that kept us going. Now, when we started having the kids and one of the kids strayed away or kinda had some kind of problem we would get together and talk it out and try to

connect more. And so for us it worked. Now it's a different story because now the kids are grown, and they've left home, and they don't live in the same town.

1:02:51

But when they come home or when I see 'em, especially in my family and I'm pretty sure the same thing for Josie and Monche and Joe and Lydia and G.I. and Celia, when the kids come back, even if it's for a brief visit, you always hear 'em say-- up to now I always hear my son says, "Mom, if it hadn't been for those good times that we had-- we had it good. None of us strayed away. None of us were in jail. None of us did drugs." We were just together, and they remember the good times. Johnny remembers everything. Oscar remembers everything. Ceci, I'm pretty sure she does, too. Because that's all we did. That's all we did. And we weren't rich, but we all worked, and we could afford to buy in the meat and the essentials to barbecue.

1:04:01

Back then it was a little bit expensive but not as much as it is right now, I grant you that. But back then we could all afford a big pack of meat or a six-pack of Cokes or orange or whatever, Sprites, and if we didn't have money for a meal we could always do the big batch of potato salad or a big pot of rice and beans and that was food for all of us.

Cynthia Torres: When you see your kids, like Johnny and Oscar and Ceci and the way they have their family and everything and the way they get together around-- they're tight-knit families. Do you think that that had something to do with even how you were raised and how that got passed down?

Blanca Torrez: I think so, too, very much. And I like seeing the togetherness. I see it in Johnny, and I see it in Oscar.

1:05:00

Oscar, they're always revolving again-- it's only family and it started with two, now it's twenty-one and it's the same family. Oscar had four kids and now those four kids they all have kids, and then their husband and wife, that counts. For Oscar it's just their four kids bring twenty-one every time they get together, twenty-one people.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Blanca Torrez: From two they go to twenty-one. Johnny's still the same 'cause the kids are not married. And Ceci, of course, she's still the same. But for Oscar from two people it goes to twenty-one. And they still do the very same thing, barbecue, birthdays, communion, church, baseball, football, and Christmas, Thanksgiving.

1:06:02

When they get together for-- and it's a set rule-- I know Oscar's schedule. On Thanksgiving they get together, all twenty-one. They have to be at Oscar's house, Abby's house at two o'clock, 'cause by two o'clock Abby has everything on the table. Everybody has to be there at two. And I've seen all twenty-one there at two. They eat and we talk, and we laugh, take pictures, and then they take off because they go to dinner with the other set of grandpas. But at Abby's and Oscar that's the rule, two o'clock Thanksgiving.

1:07:02

And all you have to do is sit down. Everything's there. Everything. They don't miss a thing and it's very nice.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Blanca Torrez: Very nice feeling, family, and you share, you laugh, you cry sometimes, but mostly it's sharing and having a good time, and eating, 'cause the turkey is the big thing at Oscar's house. And then, for Christmas it's the same thing 'cause, since Abby likes to cook a lot, most of the time they make the tamales from scratch. It's a lot of work. I've been there, too. But it's a lot of fun. About a week before the Christmas holidays she'll set out a day for making tamales and it's an all-day thing but she's very organized.

1:08:05

And she's got all the essentials, all the pots needed for every single meal that she presents, 'cause for Abby she likes to present it in a very beautiful way. She's got the dishes, the utensils, everything. The area, the table, everything's there. So they follow the same procedure but it's now bigger and more abundantly. More recipes, more good food. When we were growing up we didn't even have a turkey 'cause there wasn't no money. [Laughter] Like Easter, I remember one Easter my mom took us to the park for Easter with bean tacos in a big basket.

1:09:02

She prepared all these flour tortillas with beans, and she took us to [**Ringo** 1:09:08] Park. It was a real fun time. But we weren't eating boiled eggs or anything or cracking eggs. We weren't doing that 'cause we didn't have it. But she took us in her own way with flour and bean tortilla. We had fun. We did all the running and everything, but we didn't crack the eggs 'cause we didn't have those things. [Laughter] Christmas time the same thing. Our little Christmas tree was not a Christmas tree. It was an ebony tree that they cut from the yard and then we would glue chain from construction paper and the glue we made it out of flour and water 'cause we didn't have glue. And we cut and made the rings and we put it all around the ebony.

1:10:02

To us that was Christmas. But then there was no presents. Maybe if we were lucky there was an orange, an apple, and pecans, maybe. And we never questioned, well, where's our new clothes? Why didn't we get anything? We were just happy we were there, but no Christmas tree. It was a homemade ebony branch.

Cynthia Torres: I see from your stories and just from knowing you for a long time and everything, I see that a lot of this getting together like family was just so important, and you're able to celebrate family even though people have moved away, food, family still comes together.

1:11:01

Food is that one kind of like centerpiece for how family gathers together and gets together, and it started from very humble beginnings. You and your family you still come together around dinner even though it was simple. You still learned how to prepare things and how to be grateful no matter how simple the meal. And gathering together when you became a parent with all the cousins and stuff and still gathering around and finding ways to be family around food. And now your kids, even though people have moved in location outside the valley, people are still gathering around in the same way.

Blanca Torrez: Still, yeah.

Cynthia Torres: And I've learned a lot about family from being at the table and learning how to interact with each other and how to share stories and how to lean on people.

1:12:01

Not just how to laugh with them but also how to reach out. So I know that even the distance that idea has still remained the same, that there's family and you can still lean on each other no matter the miles when we come together. Yep. It was really an amazing family to grow up in, I have to tell you.

Blanca Torrez: I always feel that I was very blessed to have started with a good mother and then I ended up with a very good mother-in-law.

1:12:59

I have nothing bad to say about my mom, but I have nothing bad to say about my mother-in-law. We were a team. We were partners from day one. For thirty-four years our marriage I don't recall ever having a bad day with Mom or with my mom. My mom was my everything, my everything. And when she passed away it was awful. I lost everything and that's when I became to know the word depression, when I lost my mom.

1:13:58

But then, I was very lucky that I had Mamo Petra, another mom. She always says that. She always told me, "You're not my daughter-in-law, you're my daughter," she would tell me. And I would say, "Well, you're not my mother-in-law, you're my mother." And she would say, "You're not my daughter-in-law, you're my daughter." Because we never, never had a confrontation. Never yelled at each other, never. Never. And for being a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law you don't see that in many cases, many instances, but Mamo Petra was special. And she was special with everybody. She was special to everybody, not just me.

1:15:01

She was special to my mom, she was special to my family, my nieces, my sister. Everybody loved Mamo Petra. Everybody loved Mamo Petra. My mom, well, she passed away years before, but my mom was my mom, and my mom did everything right for me. Never mistreated me. Never cussed me out, never nothing. She was my little partner. She always helped me. Always.

Cynthia Torres: She made the best carne guisada.

Blanca Torrez: Oh, that's Mamo Petra.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah. [Laughter]

Blanca Torrez: Up to now-- has Oscar told you about that? Oscar and I, we worked on the recipe for a long time. We could never get it to taste like Mamo Petra's. And she always did it on the spur of the moment and it had that taste.

1:16:00

Oscar and I, we worked-- she gave us the ingredients step by step 'cause Oscar was in Dallas, "Mom, I want to do carne guisada like Mamo Petra's." So she got us the recipe step by step. I tried it. I don't know how-- all my life I tried it. That and her flour tortillas. Oh, my God! And everything clean. She was so special. I remember, Cindy, going into her room and I would open the chiffonier's drawers to put-- she ironed everything, and I always offered to help with it. I says, "Can I put this away for you?" And she says, "Yes, put it on the top drawer of the chiffonier." I would go and open the chiffonier. Man, I would freak out.

1:17:02

I says, man, how can she manage . . .? Everything was lined up, ironed, and very nicely folded. I freaked out. I said, “I wish I could get my drawers this way.” Anytime you went in there everything was in order. My God, I don't know how she did it.

Cynthia Torres: She ironed my underwear.

Blanca Torrez: She always ironed for your dad, and she was a good-- everything she did she did it right 'cause I remember watching her, how she ironed Romi's shirt and Enrique's white shirts. Man, they looked like they come out of the cleaners. And Rami was always-- his shirts, he never wore one that came out of a washer. It was always ironed.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Blanca Torrez: Always.

1:18:01

And then her cooking and then her yard-- remember her yard?

Cynthia Torres: Beautiful.

Blanca Torrez: It was spotless. Her bed was always done. I don't know how she did it. I don't know.

Cynthia Torres: But her cooking . . .

Blanca Torrez: But that cooking . . . She used to make enchiladas. Remember those enchiladas? When I met her for the first time Johnny invited me over for lunch, over to his house, and she had made enchiladas and she had all this Mexican pottery and the rice and the beans. And when I tasted the enchilada, I said, oh, my! They were heaven. [Laughter] They were so good! Her cakes, her-- everything Mamo did was so good.

Cynthia Torres: Her cornbread.

Blanca Torrez: Cornbread this big. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

1:19:00

Blanca Torrez: But up to now Oscar and I when we get together he says, “We could never get that piece.”

Cynthia Torres: That special something.

Blanca Torrez: Yes, special something. And it was written by her handwriting step by step. Nope. And Oscar tried it ‘cause Oscar liked-- he’s into cooking but it’s more-- Oscar does a lot of cooking or used to, and he always liked to try recipes. And he always tried to perfect that taste. No. And I don't know if you noticed that Oscar keeps most of Mamaw Chelo’s and Mamo Petra’s-- that to me is-- I don't know. Oscar has a special little thing here that bonds-- ‘cause he’s always talking about displaying Mamo Chelo’s things and Mamo Petra’s things, and he’s got the shelf there.

1:20:06

The mirror in your room-- I think you slept in my room-- that used to belong to my mom. It’s a 1929, and he redid it completely.

Cynthia Torres: I have Mamo’s tortilla warmer.

Blanca Torrez: Yeah. I always remember that I felt so bad. You asked for it and you told me, “Do you think I could have this--” I think you said that-- “because I want to feel close to Mamo.” My heart broke, Cindy. [Laughter] You’re so special [**mamita** 1:20:58]. Don’t ever change.

1:20:58

Cynthia Torres: The memories that I have, the very best memories are in that kitchen or coming over and you making fideo. Just the smells and everything, it just really connects me to family in a way that, like, when other memories are starting to fade it's always the food that brings me back, the carne guisada.

Blanca Torrez: No. Mamo always had this very special feeling for you, Cindy, from day one, and that's the way it was with me and my children. From day one we connected, we bonded, and with you she bonded from day one.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Blanca Torrez: She always thought about you. She always wanted to get you things, the little Mexican dresses. When you had the [inaudible 1:21:53] and the dress she was always trying to get you the right color and the little thing for your hair, and she was into everything.

1:22:03

Cynthia Torres: But I mean watching her in the kitchen, because she didn't like people in the kitchen helping, but I could watch her. I could sit on this little green chair thing, this metal chair and, oh, it's just wonderful. Yeah. But do you have advice for your grandkids or for anyone who wants to help about preparing meals and about family and stuff, some life lessons that you learned around the dinner table that might help other-- like, your grandkids bond when they have their kids and stuff?

Blanca Torrez: It's so important.

Cynthia Torres: Um-hm.

1:23:00

What are some of those really important lessons that you learned that you could pass on? Are there any lessons that you might be able to pass on to them that you learned over the years?

Blanca Torrez: [Inaudible 1:23:13] the only very important lesson is never give up, Cindy, and always love each other and forgive. If you forgive it's like there's a link or a fence there. You're here and you're there and these two are having problems but if you forgive you jump this fence, this link, and you connect with this one and then everything will be all right.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Blanca Torrez: 'Cause who are we to judge? We're nobody. And if we don't forgive we always live with sadness, with fear.

1:24:02

And if you forgive somebody and this person doesn't kind of accept your apology then that's his or her problem. You already said, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I'm very sorry. And you mean it with your heart, then you're free and it's up to this person to accept your excuse, your apology, but sometimes they don't. Well, it's on their back. You already said I am sorry, and you meant it, and that's all there is to it. 'Cause we are humans. We make mistakes. So it's very important that if I hurt you, Cindy, I need to say, Cindy, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Forgive me. And it's up to you to accept me or not.

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But me, I already apologized with all my heart and that's what God wants us to do. You do it with all your heart. If the other person is not all right with that then you're kind of free. You are

free, 'cause you said it with all your heart. And your aim is to never do it again. That's another thing. When you say I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that or hurt you. I know I hurt you but I'm sorry, well, it's up to you to forgive me but if you don't forgive me it's all right. It's all right. I already apologized. And then that's where you grow.

Cynthia Torres: Yeah.

Blanca Torrez: So children have to be taught to forgive, not to judge so harshly. We all make mistakes.

1:26:00

We all make mistakes so take it lightly and always say forgive me, Jehovah God, forgive me Jesus, and I won't do it again.

Cynthia Torres: Um-hm. Well, I want to thank you for taking the time to do this interview. It was really amazing. There's so much stuff that I learned that I didn't know before. Yeah. Thank you.

Blanca Torrez: No, thank you 'cause we bonded more, and I would not lie to you, Miss Cindy. Why should I lie to you? What I told you is what I know and what I went through. I just hope that whatever time I have left I continue to do it right, as much as I try to do my best.

1:27:02

And if I'm not too good at something, well, I can try to do better and learn. There's always room for learning, even if we're old.

Cynthia Torres: Well, thank you. Thank you for sharing.

Blanca Torrez: No, thank you for asking. [Laughter]

Cynthia Torres: Okay. I'm gonna end.

Blanca Torrez: I love you!

Cynthia Torres: I love you, too.

[End]