

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0589
Mary Zulayka Santiago
September 30, 2010**

**Field Notes – 2
Transcript – 4**

FIELD NOTES: ZULAYKA SANTIAGO

Interviewee: M. Zulayka Santiago

Interviewer: Luke Hirst

Interview Date: 09/30/2010 (Interview two of two)

Project: Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists

Location: Downtown branch of the Durham County Library, Durham, NC

THE HEIRS PROJECT: “Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of social change through the eyes and experiences of leaders in the movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism and the contemporary organizing tradition in the South.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Currently Zulayka serves as the Program Officer, Health Disparities with the NC Health & Wellness Trust Fund. Prior to this, Zulayka served in a number of roles all focused on contributing to social justice and equity. Although the majority of her work is rooted in the nonprofit sector, Zulayka has also been a small-business owner and a freelancer. She received her BA in Pan-African Studies from Barnard College of Columbia University and a Master of Public Administration from UNC Chapel Hill. She is a ‘06-‘08 William C. Friday Fellow for Human Relations.

THE INTERVIEWER: Luke Hirst grew up in Merritt Island, Florida, and came to North Carolina in 2000 to attend UNC-Chapel Hill. After graduating with a degree in Journalism and Mass Communication in 2004, Luke interned at local newspapers and magazines and took film and oral history courses at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies. From 2006 to 2008, Luke worked at Durham's El Centro Hispano, a community center for Latino immigrants, and from 2008 to 2010 Luke worked at Traction, a non-profit seeking to energize and connect the base of young progressives in the region. Luke currently works at an accounting firm focused on non-profit organizations, and serves on the Oral History Work Group of the Heirs to a Fighting Tradition project. Luke has also been active in LGBTQ issues for several years.

DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW: For both interviews we met at the Durham County library. Originally we were going to meet at Zulayka's home in Chatham County, but she had to come to Durham for some meetings, so we decided to meet in Durham. There was a small meeting room in the library where we met, but there were some background noises, and a particularly distracting vibration and banging that happened every time someone walked on the stairs above our room.

Zulayka and I have known each for several years and are friends, but had not discussed a lot of the intimate details of her life previously. She was open and engaged, but I feel that it might have been a better atmosphere for the interview in a less formal setting. From my experience, she tends to be open in many areas of her life, so this was not especially unusual for her.

I told her at the beginning that we could do the interview in English or Spanish, it was up to her. She chose English, but there are some times when she uses Spanish words to explain certain concepts. Zulayka is very animated when she talks, both with her physical gestures and her voice. Unfortunately, a lot of this cannot carry over into the written transcript.

TRANSCRIPZT--MARY ZULKAYKA SANTIAGO

Interviewee: Mary Zulayka Santiago

Interviewer: Luke Hirst

Interview Date: September 30, 2010 (Interview 2 of 2)

Location: Durham, North Carolina

Length: 2 tracks, 25:37 min and 77:09 min

START OF INTERVIEW

LH: Alright, my name is Luke Hirst, I'm here on September 30th, at, 2010, at the Durham County Library, interviewing Zulayka Santiago, and the people on the floor above us are kind of noisy, so that's what you're hearing. Do you want to introduce yourself?

MZS: I am Zulayka Santiago, and I'm happy to be here with Luke.

[Laughter]

LH: Okay. Is there anything that you're dying to start with, or to follow up with from last time? Okay. So last time we kind of finished with going over your trip to Arizona and then coming back here. And one thing you kind of mentioned but we didn't really talk about was that when you went to Arizona, you came out? So can you tell me about what that was like for you?

MZS: Sure. Since I was a little girl, I think I've always known that there has been an attraction to women. And because I grew up Seventh Day Adventist and in a household and a religion where that just wasn't even an option—actually, it was an option that led straight to Hell and damnation, so that was pretty clear – it was something that got suppressed and suppressed and suppressed. And so, I had been... I had transferred from Syracuse University

to Barnard College. Barnard College is an all-female college, and there were women making out in the quad, and I had this tremendous crush on one of my professors, Lanette Jackson, who, funny enough, I just recently saw [laughs] at the [U.S.] Social Forum. Anyway, so I had this crush on this woman and I remember telling my best friend about it at the time, but it was like a, “Oooh, she’s amazing, and oh my God she’s so beautiful,” and that’s it, that’s the extent of it. So even though I was in an environment where that would have been completely acceptable and supported, I just still... the conditioning from religion and my family just wouldn’t allow it. And I think I mentioned the last time that in order for me to have the space to come into my own, it required that much geographic distance, and so that was part of it for me – to be able to allow myself the freedom to let those feelings rise to the surface, and to explore them more. And I’ll say that before I left to Arizona, before I called off the engagement and packed up the car, my fiancé at the time – and I don’t know if I mentioned this – and I, we were pretty honest with each other. And he knew about my attraction to women; up until that point, that’s all it was. And we made an agreement shortly before calling off everything that I could explore kissing women. Did I talk to you about this already? So I was happily—well, I wouldn’t say happily engaged—I was engaged. And it was okay in his mind that I go out, and so I made this date with my good friend Marisol, and we went to this club, this little club in Raleigh, Five Star, and the purpose of that evening for me was to kiss a woman for the very first time in my life. I was 27. Yes. We go to the club, and I spot the woman [laughs] and she was *beautiful*, and she’s young, and you know. We were dancing and there’s a lot of wonderful energy between us, and finally I lean over and I ask her, “Can I kiss you?” on the dance floor. And I kissed the woman and it was like, you know, they talk about stars and rainbows and everything, everything went off. [I] went back

to the house and tell my fiancé at the time the story, and the excitement was just oozing out of me, and I said, “One thing’s become clear: I now want to make love to a woman.” [laughs] And he was like, [makes screeching sound]. Hold on.” So, before Arizona, that was already clear for me, that I needed to explore that in my life. [It] took the distance though, to actually take it to that next level. And it was like, I mean, Arizona... Sedona is like New Age mecca, so it’s a very “be yourself,” kind of crunchy, hippy, be-with-the-land sort of environment, which was really conducive for that. And I had several intimate connections with women, but didn’t get to explore this whole “I want to make love to a woman” in that context. It was when I came back to North Carolina that I was finally able to do that.

So I came out in Arizona and admitted to myself and my friends – immediate friends – that I was bisexual and loved both men and women. [I] was dating a man who was completely open to that; made out with a couple women, but not full experiences of it. And when I came back to North Carolina, [I] started my first real relationship with a woman, which was my friend – now, one of my best friends – Kim Calhoun. And it was through my relationship with Kim that I decided that this was much more than just an exploration, that in fact it was part of my identity, and part of just who I was that I had been suppressing for such a long time.

And that’s when I decided to come out to my family, which was the real coming out. Because I feel like because of the intensity of my connection to my mother and my sister, it was that sort of public announcement to my family or declaration that made it even more real for me. And it was an incredibly difficult conversation; I think up until that point my mother and my sister had perceived me as sort of the wanderer, sort of the wild child, but this took that to the next level. And I remember I had written out this letter, ‘cause I knew I would get

lost in the emotion, and my mother had her hands in her... her head in her hands. Once she figured out what the letter was about, she had her head in her hands, and her hands on her knees, and just shaking her head. And she started crying, like in the midst of it. And it wasn't a crying like a sadness, it felt like a crying like an utter disgust and disappointment. Which was the-- I think the hardest thing for me to take was that my mother would be disgusted by me. And there was a lot of the, "Ay, Zulayka," like, "You've tried everything and you feel like now this is something that you need to try," and I think for a long time my mother held it as, "Oh this is just one of you're crazy phases that you'll come out of." And then after that initial period of utter disgust and disappointment came the questions, because I come, again, from a family very open and very direct. And my mom had a million questions about what it was like to make love to a woman and what kind of toys and who did what and who used what. I have always had this – well, as an adult have had this arrangement with my mother that if she has the *cojones* [balls] to ask the question, she needs to brace herself because I'll give her an honest answer.

And so I moved from there, my first relationship was brief and intense and beautiful and not—I mean, we quickly found out that we were best friends more than anything else. And then I entered my significant, long-term relationship with a woman, which lasted three and a half years, which was with Whitney [May]. And I think it was in that relationship that my mother and my sister were able to make the evolution from being able to respect it, at least, not as a phase and some crazy little thing that Zulayka's trying out, but really respect and honor it as part of my identity, and be able to respect and honor my relationship with Whitney. It became evident to them that there was a lot of love and there was a lot of sweetness, and a lot of respect and happiness. And so my mother has always told my sister

and I, “What I want most for you and your sister is for you to be happy,” so she had to test that out for herself in a really difficult and beautiful new way. The evolution that my mother made from that time of me coming out to three years ago, two years later, of being able to come and visit my partner and I in the home that we had built together, and spend the night, and like really honor us in that way... it was really beautiful. It’s for me the most concrete example that I have of unconditional love, is to have seen my mother really step up for me in that way. And step up for me to the degree that when we went back to the Dominican Republic in 2007 with my grandmother, that her only sister was like, “How could you?” I had told my mother before we went that I was gonna be out to my family. I had no intention of hiding that from them; I was still partnered with Whitney, I wanted to honor my relationship, and my mother had my back. And had my back to the degree that when her sister was like, “Ugh, how could you?” and “I would disown my daughter,” and, “That’s just disgusting and unacceptable,” my mother was like, “What? Disown?” Like, “That’s not even an option.” And really was able to not just step up for me but step up for me in my relationship which was very telling.

LH: That’s beautiful.

MZS: Thanks. And now I’m dating a man. [laughs] And I have to tell you that – I don’t know how much of this you want to know, but in connection to the coming out and being queer and proud and--- that that was my biggest hesitation of going back to dating a man, because I knew that the reaction from my mother would be like, “Yesss! Finally!” And it has taken several conversations of me saying, “Ma, I’m still queer,” and, “Mami, I’m still bisexual.” And like, “Why are you going to this Pride thing? You’re not—“ “I’m still very much a part of that community, and if my partner can respect that, I still need you to respect

that.” And so, that I think will be an ongoing conversation, especially as I think about a family and having children and what sort of context those children will be raised in, and a ceremony – a commitment ceremony versus legal marriage – and how much of that is in solidarity, and so all of these things will continue to be tested in my life in terms of my identity.

LH: Speaking of Pride, [laughs] I recently saw you perform at [the NC] Pride [celebration] as Salvador. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

MZS: Yes. [sighs] This has been one of the most amazing explorations in my life in terms of my sexual identity. So, when I came out, let me tell what I evolved from. I came out and I was very much into traditionally femme women, and I even made a statement to my first girlfriend, Kim, the first time that I met Whitney, who I ended up partnering with for three and a half years, who’s more butch in the traditional sense. Actually, she’s more androgynous, but not femme. And I made this statement to Kim: “I don’t understand. If I wanna be with women, I wanna be with women. If I wanted to be with a man...” And then, out came all of these, you know, the nuances to being queer, and my deep attraction to this woman who became my partner, my long-term partner, and what she represented. And this sort of... my introduction to gender-fucking, like really playing around with these concepts of masculinity and femininity and how we hold it and how we play with gender and how we... So that was a whole new level of education, because I came out into a world of thinking, “Oh I’ll be with very femme women, and that’s what being queer is,” to really exploring all of the different twists and turns and beautiful possibilities that being queer presents. And so one of those possibilities for me has been stepping more, much more into

my own masculinity. And so I did it for the first time, it would have been in the fall of 2008! Oh my God, yes! It's almost a year since the first time that I ever dressed in drag.

LH: 2008 would have been two years.

MZS: Oh wait, 2009. So last year. is that...? Yes, it is true. Because it was with Jurina [Smith] that I did it for the first time. And I bought a suit and it was just one of these things that, "Oh, it will just be fun" kind of thing. It was for the Queerdigras [Queer Mardi Gras] party last year, I was like, "Oh, I've been wanting to do this, okay!" Pull my hair back, and the first time I did it with real hair and glue, which is really uncomfortable, but like, packing. I knew that I wanted to do it all the way, and I don't have much breasts so I didn't have to bandage much up here—

LH: Can you explain what packing is for people who might not know?

MZS: Oh yeah. [laughs] Packing is wearing something in between your legs to simulate a penis. The first time I did it with a strap-on, which is actually a pretty hard cock, which is uncomfortable and not recommendable. The second time it was with a sock, and then eventually I got a softie – what they call, you know, it's specifically for that purpose, it's designed to go in your pants. And what it turned out to be, one, it allowed me to sort of step into that... it became much more like a sexual persona for me, right? And of course that had to do with the environment that I was doing it—It was a party, and it was people that I knew, so it was much more free and playing with those boundaries and rubbing my penis [laughs]. I realized that when I was packing I would lead a lot more with my pelvis, like that was the driving force. And then the unexpected part of it was actually that it really deepened my compassion for Latino men. And in particular thinking about the relationship between my father and I, the sort of healing that needed to happen with that relationship, and the sort of

healing that needed to happen with Latino men overall. Because Latino masculinity in my world had been very much like, infidelity and extremely *machista* [chauvinist], and so there was some work to be done there. Being in that persona allowed me to catch a glimpse of the weight that you have to carry as a Latino man in this society, and this whole piece around what manhood means, and to be a sexual man and to—It was just really, really powerful. So there it became evident to me that this was something that I would revisit.

The performance piece of it just came out in terms of, you know, fun and taking the exploration to the next level, and the first time that I performed was actually in Chatham County and they were doing a drag night as a fundraiser for the Abundance Foundation. And what I realized was that the way that I was hearing them talk about drag and these performances was that it was a joke. And so I signed up to be one of the performers and the first time that I ever got on a mike in drag was, first of all, to acknowledge the tradition of drag performances in the queer community – of which I am a proud member – so totally outing myself in this group of people in the community that just didn't know me in that way. And then also, in Latino drag, unlike traditional – what is it? – North American drag, it's really much more about impersonation, so really stepping into your character. And I was exposed to that through a friend of mine, Oscar [Garcia], who is a drag queen, and he plays one particular character who's a Mexican singer. And when he is Paquita [la del Barrio], he is Paquita! And so being able to take that into the male drag version, and [I] hadn't seen too many examples of male Latino, of Latino drag king performers. So kind of figuring that out on my own, and then it was just incredible, and it was fun and it was different, and it was like getting the opportunity to explore different parts of myself that I had never ever tapped into. And it has a lot to do with the outfit, of course, but it has a lot to do with how people perceive

you and welcome you and respond to you. Recently at Pride, it's amazing to see how women, queer women in particular, respond to me when I'm in drag versus when I'm my day-to-day. People who would not even look at me all of a sudden are like, "Hellooo. Hello, Salvador!" So that's been really interesting to play with, and I think that I'll continue to re-visit this in my life. My current lover, beloved, has seen me. Actually one of the first times we ever hung out he came out to see me at the Pinhook [a bar in downtown Durham]

00:20:00

as Salvador, and my mother knows. She's seen pictures of me performing and is confused by it, a little confused by it, but you know, at least I'm paying tribute to my people. I'm performing meringue and salsa, which feels like a good way of honoring my own cultural tradition. Yeah, and it's great fun.

LH: Okay. How would you say that your queerness has impacted your political life and the life of activism?

MZS: When I became Executive Director of El Pueblo, I had this moment of having to decide how public I would be with my sexual identity. Up until that point, all the staff knew and all the board knew; I was Youth Program Director. They're just kind of quirky and weird anyway, so... But then stepping into this formal role, and because already the position carried so much weight... immigrant justice work carries so much weight, why am I gonna add another layer of weight? But it seemed essential, in terms of being able to lead with integrity, to be able to present my whole self. And it was challenging in some ways, but really quite encouraged and supported by the community. I think there was some confusion, because it's a different thing as you know for me as a femme, good-looking woman to step out and say "Oh, I'm queer" versus somebody who's not so socially acceptable in terms of

how they dress or how they present. It was a completely different story for my partner at the time, Whitney, and how she was perceived and received in circles, especially professional Latino circles. And for that reason, it became even more important for me to continually out myself – intentionally out myself – because I found that if I didn't, [it] was that [assumption that] oh I'm straight, and I'm just single, or you know, not married. Which is already an oddity in the Latino community at my age. [laughs] At my age! I'm an old woman. Not an old woman, an old maid.

So yeah, it became essential for me and it was before that actually that I had started visiting this group of Latino youth through Planned Parenthood. They do *Joven a Joven* [Teen to Teen], which is like sexual education, peer to peer, and I made it a part of my life to take up any invitation that I would have to come and speak to youth in particular about being a queer Latina. One, because I always felt like, what an amazing gift it would have been for me to have heard an adult speak so honestly about their sexual identity at such an early age. What a different life I would have led. And two, because again it's affirming and re-affirming to be able to hear from a person who looks like me and I am proud to be queer. So obviously it's shaped my activism and how I relate to community in that it's given me a completely different lens of broader, much more colorful lens, in terms of how I approach my work. And also, this role of gatekeeper becomes even more important, because I'm not only gatekeeping for my Latino community but I'm also gatekeeping in terms of the queer community and how I can represent and how I can bring up these issues in circles where it wouldn't necessarily be a part. Like recently I was at the Facing Race conference in Chicago and got paid to go to the pre-conference. And the pre-conference was all about the intersections of racial justice and around LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and

queer] issues. And there's a part of me that's like, "Well duh. So many of us are involved in this, in the world of social justice. How could it be that we need to be so fuckin' explicit about the analysis of the...? It's so obvious." And it's not so obvious, unfortunately, and how often it is that it feels like pushing the queer agenda instead of it being a given that the queer agenda be a part of the overall agenda, has been interesting. And going back to my role as E.D. of El Pueblo, one of the times that I had to publicly out myself which was really scary was with Reverend [William] Barber [President of the North Carolina chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the NAACP. Did I ever tell you that story?

LH: [No.]

MZS: So, this—

LH: Can you pause one second? My headphones stopped working and I just want to make sure it's still recording. It seems like it is but I wanna make sure before ---

MZS: Yeah?

LH: Okay.

MZS: So, funny story. I love to tell this story. Uh, this was early on in El Pueblo as an organization establishing a formal partnership with the NAACP, and this was pretty early on in Reverend Barber's tenure as President as well. So we were both pretty new in our leadership roles, and in felt incredibly important to me to really address this whole Black-Brown conflict head-on and really do our part in diffusing that, sort of, tension, created mostly by outsiders. Anyway, so it also felt essential to me that if we were going to forge this public partnership between the organizations that Reverend Barber and I have an authentic relationship at the core of that. And I realized that a lot of the work that the NAACP was

doing at the time, in terms of planning for their first Historic Thousands on Jones Street, was taking place in churches. And every time I stepped into a church, especially a predominantly Black church, feeling like “Oh shit,” you know, like, “I gotta hide this part of who I am, and check this identity at the door.” It just felt not integral in terms of how I wanted to be as a leader. And so I invited Reverend Barber over to our office. At this time, Marisol, my good friend, was our Advocacy Director, and he brought one of the secretaries of his church or something, and so she wasn’t really part of the conversation but we were all sitting around this table in my office. And I say to him, “Well Reverend Barber, I think that it’s important that if you and I are gonna forge ahead with this relationship, I’m interested in building authentic alliances with you. And in order to do that I need you to know that I identify as a queer woman. And as a queer woman it’s sometimes difficult to step into these predominantly Christian spaces and I feel like there’s a part of me that wouldn’t be welcome there.” He leaned back in his chair and he said, “Did you say career woman?” [laughs] I said, “No, Reverend Barber, I said ‘queer woman.’” “Oh, th- that’s what I thought you said.” And unfortunately he went on this tangent about how some of his own personal issues, he needs to, you know he’s never brought to light because he can’t, they’re not part of the agenda, and the agenda is the most important thing, and made references to Bayard Rustin from back in the day, and the fact that they put Bayard in the back of, you know, not in the forefront because of the whole queer thing. And I kind of pushed back a little, and I was like, you know it goes against the grain of who we are, how is it that you expect us to hide it from anyone? I didn’t get very far with him. But ever since then, felt like a mutual respect. I mean I don’t think there was ever a point where Reverend Barber said publicly “my queer brothers and sisters” [laughs] but he knew that about me and I felt that it was essential in terms of,

again, like really if we're gonna work together, we're gonna work together, and you need to know this about me. And this sort of pushing sexual identity behind the curtain because it's not part of the agenda, it just really does not make sense. And the fact that again, because I was functioning within these really heteronormative circles, that unless I intentionally and kind of awkwardly at times out myself, it would just go assumed that I was straight.

LH: You had started that topic with saying that there was a defining moment where you had to think about whether or not you were gonna bring this to the front or not.

MZS: Mm hm.

LH: Did you mean like was there a story behind that, or did you just mean this period of time where you kind of, you know...

MZS: Yeah, just that period of time. And I did, with the media, with whoever I came across. And it was never like I had this fear in the beginning that it would be the focus of a story, or—But it never was. And again, I don't know if that was because of how I appeared and how acceptable my type of queerness was, but it never presented an issue. It felt like, in my main circles it felt really welcome and my partner felt really welcome as well.

LH: Can you talk a little bit more about El Pueblo? Last time you had just mentioned how, we'd gotten to where you got hired as Youth Program Director, and you've mentioned today that you became Executive Director. Can you talk a little about your time there?

MZS: Mm hm. So I had been there two years as a Youth Program Director and was quite happy, and was dressing a lot like I dress now, really funky and it was a... I mean I was invested, but it was an easy job to leave at the office. It wasn't all-consuming, and my predecessor was – is – a very strong career woman. Career woman, not queer woman.

[laughs] And one of these power brokers, and also very much mainstream Latina, in that a lot

of the allegiances for the organization up until that point were with pretty mainstream Latino organizations. We were like the little... we were modeled after the National Council of La Raza, which is again a national mainstream... This question of Latino as buffer class, it really begs attention when you look at those types of models. And so she was basically the founding director, although she likes to say she wasn't technically because there was a board before she came along, but she was the first. So [there was a] strong organizational culture based on her, and pretty much hierarchical you know, very much she's on top, we all kind of follow her lead, and so when she decided to leave the organization, it was like, "Whoo!" This is a huge deal to separate her identity from the organization's identity.

I remember her calling me into her office one time. And she and I, we got along generally, there was respect, but there wasn't a sort of mentor-protégé type of relationship. I never welcomed that and I think it had a lot to do with just our different approaches to leadership and connection to community. And so she called me into her office and said, "I'm leaving, you know, and would you ever consider applying for the position of Executive Director?" And I was like, "Ugh! Heell no. No! I love my life too much." And what I had seen in terms of models of people in Executive Director role were people who were consumed to say the least, and sometimes martyrs for the cause, and very little life-work balance, and no that's not what I wanted. And it started a conversation which lasted a while around stepping into responsibility. There at the time weren't that many Latino leaders in the state who had the education, who had the sort of experience, who had the eloquence to be in that role. So this sense of responsibility for the community and gate-keeper: "You got this privilege, you've had all these privileges, Zulayka. Now it's time to put those privileges to use." And it was that sort of, woo. Would I? Could I? And I got, I wouldn't say convinced

but encouraged, to step into that role. I think really knowing in my heart that it wasn't how I wanted to live my life, and knew pretty early on, like two months early on into the role, that it was gonna eat me up if I stayed in that role. And I stayed for almost two years, and that felt like a stretch for me, and it was a new degree of stress in terms of a lot of migraines and I began grinding my teeth again. I had bursted blood vessels in my eyes, and—I thought that I could do the position differently in terms of implementing more self-care, but I was so young in my own vehicles for self-care that getting swept into that position was like [sound] Anything that I had learned up until that point, like I was trying so hard to do like sitting meditation in my office, walking meditations around the office, stepping out. And it just wasn't enough, the tools weren't enough to outweigh the demands and the sorts of... And it was a crazy time for immigrant justice – and it still is for immigrant justice in the state – but even moreso then. And I also realized that in order to take the organization from that place of true hierarchy into flattening it and shared leadership and collaboration, which is the only way that I saw myself surviving in that role, would have taken years. Like five to seven years, and I think I would have lost myself completely had I stayed that long.

And so we made some real progress in terms of opening the organization back up to the community, like so well received by community and fellow partners, and I did a listening tour across the state. That was my way of starting my tenure, like, hey, if we're saying we're a statewide organization let's at least try to make that true, and creating spaces for people internally to come up into leadership roles, like collaborative leadership teams and really trying to take the pyramid and turn it much more to circles. Quite literally, like we tried to redo the organizational chart and got lots of pushback on that. And ultimately I chose to take care of myself, and taking care of myself meant leaving that role. And I gave the organization

a six-month notice, and I worked with my board chair at the time, and in some ways felt like, “Oh shit,” you know, guilt, like I’m leaving the community, or I’ve let down my community, or I’ve let down my co—But I think most of what I got from people was a wishing me well, because I think they could see that I was trying and I think they supported me in taking care of me, you know, and being able to contribute to the work in a much more healthy and holistic way, versus this sort of frazzled, always going sort of way. Undoubtedly it was the right decision. And a lot of the work around discernment and getting to that place of, “Okay, this is what I need to do for me,” came out of the Wildacres Leadership Initiative, which I will be forever grateful in my life. For some of the values and the principles that that program helped me to develop, and at the core of this practice that they introduced me to called clearness councils, which is a Quaker practice, and which has been a part of indigenous culture for eons, of sitting around a circle and letting your inner teacher really emerge and listening to – whatever you wanna call it, intuition, inner truths, whatever – has been an ongoing part of my life and my activism and my way of being in community since that introduction.

LH: What were some of the things that were most challenging about your time at El Pueblo?

MZS: [laughs] I mean it was a phenomenal education on many different levels. I think the more challenging pieces were around funding. El Pueblo, its main annual fundraiser for years has been La Fiesta del Pueblo, which is a big Latino fundraiser, and part of it being so big at the time was that there were so many corporate sponsors. And that really came face to face with these questions of integrity for me. Like, if we’re doing all of this for the Latino community, how is it that we can take money from entities like McDonald’s and Western

Union, who on one side are like, “Here! Take our money, and let’s celebrate Latino culture, and buy more Big Macs!” And on the other hand are completely contributing to our community’s issues with obesity and diabetes and all these... really undermining community in a lot of different ways. But I was still functioning again within a very mainstream sort of level conversation around these things, where scratching the surface wasn’t really all that encouraged or welcome, especially if it meant turning down \$25,000 worth of sponsorships. So we were able to do, I was able to do some work with that on the board and completely say no to certain sponsors, and it came with a lot of work, but you know, McDonald’s was still a sponsor when I was Executive Director there. And that was really difficult for me. That, and the lobbying component of the work. El Pueblo is known for its advocacy work, and part of their strength in advocacy at the time had a lot to do with their lobbying power. So my predecessor had been a registered lobbyist, our Advocacy Director was a registered lobbyist, I became a registered lobbyist, and we were one of three or four Latino lobbyists in the General Assembly. And we had a contract lobbyist who was not Latina, and just the whole putting on the suit and having to go into this predominantly white, male space to try to tell your story and beg for support was just, ugh. Yeah, exhausting to say the least. And the little song and dance that you gotta do in order to even get their attention, or get a few minutes of their time, the sorts of compromises that are required to play that game... I learned quickly that that’s just not how I want to spend my life really.

And then the media piece was also incredibly difficult for me. At the core of it is really a question about an organization that places itself as the spokesperson for the Latino community, which El Pueblo had done for a while, and for me really questioning what is our connection to community, like where’s our base? We didn’t really have a base, again it was

like this upper-tier kind of advocacy work without a real rooting in community, and so it felt to me essential that if we were gonna claim that, then shit, it needs to be well-founded. Well-grounded in community, and what were the vehicles that we needed to implement to get to that place, and we were far from that, so it felt difficult for me any time media asked for the Latino perspective on any piece of legislation or any sort of issue that was going on in the community, like how it is that you take advantage of that role and that sort of attention, and then be true to the fact that you're basically speaking for yourself and your Board of Directors. You're not really speaking, it'd be impossible to speak for all Latinos in North Carolina. So yeah, the position, that role really challenged me in a lot of different ways, and it of course also allowed me to grow professionally in leaps and bounds.

LH: What were some of the biggest lessons you learned?

MZS: Again, it's that question of what it means to lead with integrity. Like even if it meant me leaving that particular leadership role, that being, getting more and more clear as to what's negotiable and what's non-negotiable in my leadership, I think was an amazing gift. And also, being able to celebrate my many strengths as a leader and that it can look like me wearing a suit and going to the General Assembly if I choose that path, but it can also mean me stepping back and allowing another type of leadership to have space in the community, that that's an essential piece of leading, as well, not just hogging the spotlight, which I think really was challenged in that role. And I mean the gifts go on and on in terms of how I connected to community partners and what that work meant, in terms of really collaborating with people versus quick exchanges for in front of the cameras or for whatever grant we were submitting, so really exploring these questions of authentic relationships and building beyond whatever campaign was happening at the time and needed our attention.

LH: I know that in the nonprofit sector there's a lot of people feeling overwhelmed and burnt out and a lot of the things that you talked about. Do you think that there is a way to make positions like that more sustainable, or not? Or you have to be somebody who wants to choose between having a life and...?

MZS: That's a really good question, Luke, and one that I've been sitting with for years. As you know I'm on the Board for Stone Circles, which is an organization that was born out of these principles of bringing our whole self into activism, and our reality is that we're struggling with a lot of the same issues as many other nonprofits functioning within this nonprofit-industrial complex, and our Executive Director deals with a lot of the same pressures in terms of demand on time and a million different priorities, and—I don't know, I'm at the place in my life right now where I find it difficult to believe that unless an organization is born out of those values and out of that belief in alternative structures, that it is incredibly difficult to take something that is traditionally hierarchical, as small or big as it may be, and shrink it, morph it into something much more collaborative, in every way. And so when I was in that role and I was desperate, searching for alternatives, like there has to be some alternatives out there to this sort of E.D. carrying... Just, there has to be. The only people I found locally was Center for Participatory Change in Asheville, and they had just culminated their strategic planning process, and their collaborative rotation leadership kind of model. And I also found out that they were definitely an organization born out of those values, from the beginning. So unless it's like, "These are our grounding values and anything that distracts from this we just won't accept," it's much more likely for me to succeed in this sense of the conversation versus trying to put little Band-Aids or little supports in, or tweak this little thing and tweak th—'cause ultimately, you're gonna be face-to-face with some of

the same challenges. And yeah, I just don't believe that role or that structure is sustainable, and I think more and more nonprofits are realizing that for themselves. There's some encouragement, like there are organizations who are exploring co-directorships and again, leadership teams, but those feel, at least in my perspective, those still feel like they're up-and-coming versus well-established "and this is the alternative model." And I think part of the challenging the status quo is that it's incredibly daunting to venture out into something new, and there's a lot of comfort in what's been done before, and this sort of encouragement that nonprofits get from funding sources that this be the model that they follow, it's tough. So, I don't know if I have an answer really yet for that.

LH: So tell me about what happened when you left El Pueblo.

MZS: I left El Pueblo and started walking on stilts. [laughs] Seriously. I had this amazing gift from the universe, I believe in you get what you give, and I felt like, you know, up until this point in my life had done a lot, had given a lot of myself for community and for family, and my people, however that gets defined. And so when I left, as I was leaving there was this opportunity for part-time, well-paid contract work with the North Carolina People's Coalition for Giving, and it was a, kind of a new-ish friend/colleague of mine, Gita Gulati-Partee, who was running this project, and the project was really focused on amplifying the wealth and power of giving in communities of color. And I felt really pulled towards that work because it allowed me to explore my own issues with money and with being the poor girl recipient versus able to celebrate and acknowledge, again, the many ways in which I have given to community and I am a philanthropist. So this idea of reclaiming "philanthropist" for myself and for our community was really just powerful work, especially just coming out of what I was coming out of, the nonprofit industrial complex. And it was

supposed to be a six-month contract that kept extending and extending and it extended to two and a half years, which was again, one of the most amazing gifts in my career because of the flexibility and space that it allowed for me.

And I kid around with stilt-walking, but I was, I started doing crazy things, like stilt-walking and dancing with fire and just playing... taking an Adobe Photoshop class. Because part of the symptoms or side effects or however you wanna call it of the nonprofit industrial complex is that it really strips you of your energy and of your creative energy in particular, because you're so exhausted by this greater mission or higher good that I felt completely disconnected from my own creative power. So having the space again to be able to say, "Ah!" Like, what can I do to play? Hula-hooping and silly little things but that allowed me to sort of rekindle that part of my brain to the degree that in that space, in that two and a half years, the last year of it, year and a half, I used my other part-time energy to start my own business. And it was, the business itself was like a crazy fun experiment in imagination and creativity and taking care of community, but in a completely different way than I had been doing, an exploration to this other sector that I had never explored. And so that all feels like it was part of the gift of this, of this work, of this transitional work.

LH: What time do you have to go?

MZS: 4:30. Yeah. It's 2:30 now.

LH: Okay. So can you tell me about the business? How that came about?

MZS: Do you want the full story?

[laughter]

LH: As much as you're willing to share.

MZS: I was living in Durham, working with the People's Coalition, so I had some space and freedom, and I wanted fresh-pressed juices, and didn't have access to them. I'm talking hard-core beet, carrot, spinach, parsley, ginger, you know, I wanted those kinds of juices. And there was nowhere, actually, then, to get it. Eventually the Whole Foods in Chapel Hill opened up a juice bar, but at the time there wasn't. And so my partner and I at the time were playing with this idea and I was like, well why couldn't I start a business? And the idea of having a little retail space, community-gathering space to serve fresh juices. Like, "It'd be great!" And I was like, "Okay!" And I started the business planning process, and then quickly talked myself out of it. So that first round was in February 2008, yeah. 2008. And talked myself out of it. Like, I didn't have money, I sure as hell didn't have money. I didn't have skills, I'd never run a business, I didn't have any real contacts, I'd never done anything in food or retail. Other than making my own juices I didn't know shit about making juices, okay, talk yourself out of it. A year later, after my partner and I had split up, and I took this trip to Brazil, this solo journey, my second international solo backpacking journey. And three weeks in Brazil, and while there I re-read *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, and he talks about your personal legend. I mean, this little book has changed many, many, many, many lives, because it's such a powerful message, and so I came back, and, "Okay. I'm gonna pursue this juice bar dream." And I had already decided that the retail space would be too big of a risk financially. Just yeah, huge. Some of the advice that I had gotten from some of the experts I had spoken to was "start small." And so already in my head it was a mobile version of it. And I had found these women in Brooklyn who had converted an ice cream truck, and tried to reach out to them unsuccessfully, so I came back and I was like, well, I'll follow this business plan process again until I could follow it no more, thinking that when it

came to funding the dream it would fall because I didn't have no money. So I got a bunch of folks excited in the process and got some good feedback on the business plan and then ended up getting a small business owner micro-enterprise loan through the Rural Center [the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center]. Because I was living in Chatham County and that was gonna be my base, and they gave me a \$20,000 loan and then on top of that I got a \$5,000 loan from a private investor, and had already bought the bus so I was pretty confident at that point that I would be able to follow this through.

And it was, again, it was the most incredible re-connection to vision and to creativity and to possibility. It was just beautiful, to be able to take something from this stage of a spark in your imagination – like seeing a colorful bus with wings! – to learning and things like health inspections and sinks with two drain boards and sewage tanks and diesel engines and all these things that I had never thought that I would even know, came because of this gift of following this through. And it was a super-steep learning curve in terms of like, what the hell kind of generator does it take? Because nobody had done this before, which was the other gift and challenge of doing something totally trailblazing. There wasn't anybody that I could call and be like, "So. What kind of generator did you use?" I was able to get one piece of information from the women who were doing this juice bus in Brooklyn, was what kind of juicer did you use, and even that to be not a good match for what I was trying to do. So very expensive trial and errors, and huge success in terms of like, community loved it! And the media loved it! And people just like being around that bus, yes I think it had a little something to do with the fact that the product that I was offering was really healthy, It was so good for your body, and... But I think mostly what called people to that bus was this being able to witness somebody else living into their dream, like really trying to live into their

dream, and the possibility of that, and the sort of inspiration and spark of it that people just wanna touch that for a little bit, and you feel the energy of [it], and if it cost me six bucks for a smoothie, well then “Oh yeah! Give me a smoothie [laughs] in addition to that.” And the music and the kids the hula hoops.

And in terms of a model for a business profit-driven endeavor it was a total failure. A total failure financially in terms of the money that I invested, and how incredibly high the costs of organic produce is, and how much I was trying to charge for a cup and how many cups I gave out for free when I couldn't even afford to pay for all of it. Total failure. And I think that again, this question of was it worth it? Of course it was totally worth it. And I'd say I'd do it again – much more wise but I would do it again – and it was again a coming face-to-face with the fact that my intent at doing something differently, taking a frame that currently exists and trying to do it differently. So taking the Executive Director role and trying to do it differently, or taking private enterprise and trying—It didn't work. And so it brings me back to this place of, is it that these things have to be born out of—like beyond, because the business was born with this like really wonderful, “come heal the collective soul” kind of vision, but it was still functioning within a profit-driven frame. Like, unless it is born out of more than just one person taking the risk, all of this financial backing, to shift that sort of drive that, you know, revenue, revenue has to be what you're hungering for.

Is that the only way that it, something like this, could work? Is the question that I'm sitting with now, so since June—The business lasted just under a year. Before the [U.S.] Social Forum in June of 2010, I pulled it off the market, decided to go into a quiet phase, and haven't come out of the quiet phase. And I think a lot of it is like, I was again, trying hard to make this model work for me, and it just ultimately decided that it wasn't gonna. It wasn't

gonna, and I was working like a fuckin-- working like a mule, under this different banner you know, but still working like a mule. And in terms of return and coming face-to-face with the realization that no matter how hard I worked or how much I tried to contort myself to make the model work for me, it wasn't. And it wasn't gonna get to the place where I could live off of the business, so all of this was done because of the subsidy of the work that I was doing, the part-time contract work. I would have never been able to take that sort of financial risk if I didn't have a steady income. In June that income ended, which shifted everything. So yeah, I'm going back to full-time office work. And there was an intense grieving process, definitely, when I came to the realization that the business was a financial failure and that I wouldn't be able to keep it up, for sure. There was this grieving process around – not because of “oh, what a shame, Zulayka, such a public endeavor,” like everybody was gonna know that it didn't work. It wasn't really about that, for me it was what this business, what this process represented was, again, being able to touch creativity and freedom at this whole new level, and did it mean that that life just wasn't accessible to me? Did it mean that was my attempt and because I couldn't make it work, “Oh well. Now you have to go back to the humdrum and the sort of ough of normal existence,” whatever. And no. I was able to come out of that grieving process and realize that, as with any other significant experience in my life, the gifts, the lessons that I learned through that experience are gonna be with me wherever I go. Like in all this interviewing that I was doing for this next phase, it came up, the things that I learned and the grounding that I got from it, and how it shaped who I am, and that that was gonna be consistent, regardless of what the hell role I was playing, that those things would have to be alive for me, have to be. Because it's an integral part of who I am, so mostly that remains to be tested.

LH: So what are your plans for next steps?

MZS: For the business, or for my own?

LH: Either. Both.

MZS: So the business right now we're trying to figure out [laughs] a way to raise \$20,000. Basically what they would do is, it would help me pay off all of the Rural Center loan and some of the private investor loan. And then the bus would be basically gifted to this non-profit entity which would use it as a community-building vehicle. So I'm talking to two people right now and one of them wants to use it as a way to provide income-generating for a group, primarily youth of color that have been doing organizing work in Raleigh, so they're gonna be doing late-night food service, grilled cheese sandwiches, for three nights a week. And the other group wants to use it as a way to provide healthy after-school snacks for under-resourced children, in Northeast Central Durham in particular. So, again, it's a hell of an economic environment to be trying to raise \$20,000, but I figure we should at least try! And what a gift that would be for these entities to have access to that bus without the weight of debt as a way of starting off their endeavor, so that anything that gets generated goes directly back into the community and into paying a living wage to the youth that are working on the bus, is what I would like to happen. I don't know if it actually can, but... yeah.

LH: And for you?

MZS: And for me, I accepted a role as a Program Officer with the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund in the area of health disparities. So this piece of work that the bus helped me to focus on even more in terms of health and well-being for the community and our addiction to sugar, my lineage of diabetes, the prevalence of obesity in communities of color... being able to address those issues at a completely different level,

completely different angle. And it's an opportunity to leverage a lot of power, like \$12 million worth of power, in grants that go out to community organizations and schools and health clinics across the state addressing these issues. And I hope to be able to, again, bring in some of that creativity in terms of acknowledging and celebrating the efforts that are happening within the community that wouldn't traditionally be recognized by funding institutions. Like, I hope that my perspective will help put some more focus and more resources onto that type of work. And it's a state job in an air-conditioned box in Raleigh. So yeah.

LH: And I hope, too, that you're able to bring some creativity and different perspectives to the job.

MZS: Yeah.

LH: So before we started recording you talked about something that I don't know whether you want to make public or not, but kind of your priorities and what you're looking for right now.

MZS: Oh yeah. I'm 35 years old, 35 and a half almost. And I think in our first interview there was this recognition that the work that I'm doing in this life, the healing that I'm doing ripples forward and it ripples backward, and I think at this juncture in my life I am really interested in how it will ripple forward, meaning the next generation, meaning the family that I will raise. I've known for a while that I wanted to mother, I'm clear that I wanna mother. The piece around birthing is still a possibility – I think I would like to birth at least one child – but [I] know for sure from my work in the juvenile court system and in the foster care system that adoption is a part of my life's path, and adopting in particular through the foster care system at least one child, maybe two children, feels like one of the greatest gifts in

terms of my role in life. That all of this work in terms of activism, social justice, you know, macro-level systems, is fine and it's beautiful, and the sort of direct impact that I can have in terms of influencing the next generation in my role as mother is just as important if not more important than all of that work. And feel really pulled towards that, and so these shifts in my career from the more risky sort of unknown endeavors into the much more secure, sustainable work has a lot to do with the fact that I'm yearning to create a stable home and a safe environment where I could welcome children into my life. And, yeah, that's a very, very different twist in my career and, you know, some people, especially some people in my family, in the Latino culture, would say that I'm coming into it pretty late at 35, but I think I've needed [laughs] all of these lessons up until this point to be ready to really take that plunge into what motherhood means, and the sort of attention and focus and, yeah, to a degree, self-sacrifice that that requires. So I think I'm finally ready!

LH: So you talked earlier about these being very insecure things that you were trying out, or risky endeavors, but also things where you were living into your dream, people just wanting to try to touch that, and the creativity and integrity that came with it. And you definitely kind of give that off, as an outsider looking at you, you know, I feel like that's what I've seen, is somebody who really, you know, has been going after her dreams and wants to just really be who she is, and live into that all the way. And so, then, it feels like a shift when you're talking about looking for security and thinking about family and self-sacrifice and all of that. Do you think that—I mean, I think there is a, definitely, especially you know with young children, self-sacrifice that does have to happen, and a lot of time and energy that has to go into that – but do you think that you'll kind of come back to this, or somehow merge into that, this other part of you that's the more free-flowing part?

MZS: Oh God, I hope that I never leave that, right? A lot of my work has been about welcoming wholeness and this whole, like, stepping into integrity at its fullest, has been about wholeness, and that I do hope, I mean, having a sobering sort of a realistic perspective about what mothering would require AND wanting to embrace the sort of both/and possibility that it doesn't require me to... that parts of me don't have to die in order for these other parts to come alive. That it could be in fact a sort of expansion of self, rather than a negotiation, right? 'Cause that brings back up these issues of fragmentation, that maybe I've waited this long in my life, and this long to be firmly rooted in these things so I can pass this on to my children.

And I've had a conversation with a close friend about this, like, I think about the fact that from the immediate generation before me to me, so from my mother to me, the drastic expansion in freedom in terms of self-determination, and again that has a lot to do with the privileges of education, and having been raised in a society that, for the most part, supports that. So there was a huge shift from my grandmother to my mother, obviously. And then from me, from my mother to me, I think about the gifts that I would be able to pass on to a child in terms of fostering their connection to imagination and creativity, from the earliest age, and encouraging wholeness from the earliest age, and what a beautiful thing that would do in terms of shifting society. And we see it some, now, with the next generation, when I see my friends, the people in my social justice circles and their children, and how they're raising their children, I think that's an amazing way to give back and to impact society and to impact our world, you know? So I feel like one is completely intertwined with the other, that there is no separation, and that my hope is that the self-sacrifice that it would require does not mean a death of self, you know? That there are things that I can willingly let go of – *willingly* let go

of – in terms of how self-centered and kind of self-focused I have been in my life, versus things that I never wanna let go of in my life, and in fact I want to pass on for generations, so... We'll see. I mean, that's definitely a "we'll see" area because these are all sort of like predictions. I've never raised children before, I've never been a mother before, and I have some examples in terms of my sister and, you know, close friends, but there's nothing like doing it yourself, as I've learned.

LH: So here's the big question: What's your vision of a liberated world?

MZS: [laughs] Oh gosh. Where was I that...? Oh, I was at the Facing Race conference, that was the way that it ended one of the panels. I think in particular about balance and reconnection with the Earth that I think we've completely lost. The sort of exploitation of this planet and of other beings, not just humans but beings, has brought us to this place of... I know this sounds dramatic, but I think we're on the verge of annihilating ourselves as a society if we keep down this path. So when I think about a liberated world, I think a lot about heeding to the messages of our elders and of a lot of indigenous people who have been telling us for a long time, like, "Slow your roll, man, slow your roll! You think you're gonna be on this planet, you gotta re-analyze your connection to each other and to the planet." And so I had gotten something a while back via Facebook about, what if our prayer was our communication with one another and our holy water was the rivers of the oceans? And the messages that we get when we're truly connected and truly open to nature for me is completely connected to a liberated world. So a liberated world means reconnection to one another on a really intimate level and then reconnection to this Earth on a really intimate level. And I think beyond that only goodness can flow.

LH: Where do you fall at the moment on the optimism/pessimism scale about achieving that?

MZS: [laughs, sighs] That's a really good question. I still think I'm on the optimistic side. And if I weren't, I wouldn't even be considering having children. Like, I think on my more pessimistic days I think, why in the world would anybody wanna bring another life into this planet? And [I] still struggle with that actually when I think about the birthing question. Like, why? There's so many children already in need that I could mother, and feel like that's still a very real possibility. But overall, I believe this is one of my undergirding philosophies in life, is believing in the goodness of people and trusting in the goodness of people, and even if that means that that would be taken advantage of and I would be crushed in the process, I'd much rather go down that path than become a cynical, bitter, closed-off woman. That's not how I wanna live my life.

So yeah, I trust that there is an awakening happening, not just with people like you and me, not just within these social justice spheres, but, you know, the economic crisis, the sort of like you know, what recently happened with the oil spill in the Gulf... These are really strong messages that even if you're trying hard to be cut off from that reality, you can't but be jarred and something be shaken. And I hope eventually something shifts in terms of our consciousness that would really bring us to that next level. And I don't know if the optimism means that... Actually I'm not attached to optimism meaning society goes on as it currently exists, but that the optimism is completely connected to there being a dramatic shift in how we do things and understanding that dramatic shift may not mean that we all survive. And I don't mean that in only a death/living sort of way, but if that dramatic shift is going to take place, that some of this, some of all of this, has to die off, and I'm open to that too.

That's connected to like my take of organizations, like nonprofit organizations, and the belief that sometimes nonprofit organizations need to die off, like they just need to let 'em go, and so death is not something that I fear in that sense.

LH: How would your answers to those questions have changed at different times in your life?

MZS: Ooh. Very much. I think, I mean, definitely during the parts of my life where I was suffering from depression, it would have been much more the pessimistic side. Yeah, and when I'm utterly exhausted and bitter, I think, you know, obviously I would lean more towards the pessimistic. But when I feel grounded and um, yeah, and connected, then the optimism comes back to life.

LH: So what do you do to sustain yourself and nurture yourself so you stay grounded and connected?

MZS: Mm hm. Well, a huge part of it for me is staying connected to nature, which means, you know, something as simple as going on walks with my dog, like on the river or in the woods, and sitting on my porch in silence, just looking out into the woods and seeing how the seasons impact the trees, is a really, just a beautiful lesson to observe about change. I do silent meditation, not consistently these days, in the morning. I usually start off my days with silence, not necessarily sitting. And I go away on silent retreats at least once a year, I wanna get it up to two, two times a year, where it's complete silence for at least two days, ideally five days. For somebody who presents as an extrovert, I'm actually really an introvert in terms of where I get my energy. And I can do all this, and you know, the performance and the glittery sort of personality, I can do and I do well, but in terms of finding peace and rejuvenation, it really comes from a really quiet place. And again, I feel quietest and safest

when I'm in nature. So, that's a big piece of it. I do yoga on occasion, I was in a class and I need to go back to that. When I go back to the working world, yoga needs to be a consistent part of it, 'cause it dramatically impacts my being. I eat healthy most of the time. I have an addiction to French fries [laughs], but I balance it out, you know. I try to seize every opportunity to celebrate, I don't think we do enough of that in our fight and struggle for social justice, trying to stay connected to the child in me, and sometimes that looks like hula hooping or dancing and you know, whatever, dress up. I love to dress up. So I think those are pieces that I hope to continue fostering in my life, regardless of how "professional" I need to be.

LH: It's funny that you say you love to dress up, because it kind of seems like every day you dress up, with your everyday clothes. Which I love! I mean, right now you're wearing two different colored tights, I don't even know how that happens, and you know, bright blue and green and purple, and it's great. And you always have like multiple layers, and sparkles... What kind of a role does that play... I mean, does that play a role in nurturing yourself?

MZS: Oh yeah. Totally, totally. I mean, color, like color overall – and this next little house that I'm moving into, one of the arrangements is I can paint whatever color [laughs], because I... Frida Kahlo's house is actually a real inspiration to me. Living in color, like vibrant colors does something to my being, and when I stepped in here I said on gray days, I like to wear extra-bright colors, and it's true, because I'm so influenced by weather, I'm a Cancer, so I'm influenced by weather quite a bit. Yeah, and what this triggers in people is actually really fun as well. I was just at Big Lots [laughs] before coming here, and I was standing there looking at something and this older African-American man comes in the door,

and he's laughing at me, like he's laughing at me but to my face. And he's saying, "Oh my gosh, this suit you have on is just amazing." And he's laughing, and I'm like, I don't know if I should be offended or say thank you. But I think it motivates people to smile, to see somebody who's like, you know, as an adult dressed like this, 'cause you see this in children a lot. And I tell my friend Chantelle [Fisher-Borne], and Marcie [Fisher-Borne], that I often wanna dress like their daughter, and I'm vicariously dressing... and I think most of the time, that's my inspiration. You know, I think on days like this I can get away with a lot more of this than, again, going to the General Assembly or going to some meeting, but even in those contexts, I definitely try to sparkles it up as much as possible, and know that I have to be taken seriously, so....

LH: Who have been some significant leaders and mentors for you, and why?

MZS: Hm. [sigh] I mean obviously my mother is the most significant mentor, ever, in my life. Um, you know, I could think of a couple of teachers in elementary school who believed in me, but it felt a little conditional in terms of my performance, academic performance. And then I think about teachers that I've never known personally and don't think I will ever know, but *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle was one of my life-changing books and I consider him a teacher even though he's never, I've never known him. I feel that way about some of Alice Walker's work and Pema Chodron, Parker Palmer, these are all people whose work I've read that has influenced my life tremendously. I think of some poets that have impacted my life in that way, like Hafiz and Rumi, have definitely been parts of that world. And this question of teacher, I remember a few years back saying that I was ready, I felt like I was ready for a spiritual teacher. You know, somebody to play that role in my life, and it never happened. And I don't know if it ever will, like having somebody

formally play that role, because I feel really open to the many, many teachers that I have in my life. Some of them are my friends and colleagues, and some of them are much, much younger than I am. And I think it's a good thing, to stay that open to mentorship and teaching from all over the spectrum.

LH: What are some key lessons you've learned about social justice activism, movement-building, and community organizing?

MZS: Well it goes back to this: that being a martyr is no good to anybody, and that before we can serve externally, we have to serve internally, really taking care of ourselves, and that our work needs to be firmly rooted in circles beyond ourselves. So it's just another way of saying community, like whatever community looks like for you. And going back to this thing of wholeness, I think that a saying that I've heard a lot in nonprofit circles is "What hat am I wearing now?" you know, and "I'm wearing my funder hat" and "I'm wearing my..." That I'm most pulled towards spaces that encourage all of the hats at once, or no hats at all, however, you know, whatever moves you. And that working in silos, which is how a lot of the work still happens, unfortunately, ultimately leads us into the ground and doesn't bring about the change that I think most of us are looking for. So that this work of looking at intersectionality, at intersections, needs to be at the core of all of the work that we do, versus, you know, again, pulling in partners and allies, picking and choosing for moments in time, but that it needs to be an undergirding value for all of our work. And that of course that needs to be from [unintelligible] and real relationships, like authentic connections to one another, and that that can only come with time, and so our efforts for quick and expeditious changes don't really foster that sort of connection.

LH: How important is it to you to organize specifically in the South and in North Carolina?

MZS: Oh, very. [laughs] After my—did I say this the first time?—after my Latina identity, my Southern identity is right up there in order of importance. So my family did the Puerto Rico to Louisiana trajectory, which is uncommon for Caribbean people, and so when I moved to the South, the Deep South, was when I was 6 years old, and my formative years, 6 to 13, were in the South. Then I went way up Northeast, which was incredibly difficult, and felt like in '97 when I was 21, I came back home to the South, to North Carolina. Yeah. And this very much feels like part of my identity and influences the context of, obviously, the context of my work. And I think I'll be here for a while. There's just something about the Southern aesthetic and the Southern flavor, and I've done a lot of traveling, fortunately, around the States and around the world, that make me always wanna come back home to the South. Yeah.

LH: Do you know what it is about the South that you treasure?

MZS: There's a lot, and I think, you know, the move from Louisiana to Massachusetts made it really clear to me that although we have our issues, obvious issues, with race in the South, it feels much more, like, real and workable because people seem to be more honest with it, you know? The things that come out of people's mouths, like "Ahhh!" Some people could be appalled, but I so much prefer that to the sort of suppressed, underlying, kind of candy-coated oppression – racial oppression – that I experienced in Massachusetts, which again is New England, the Northeast. Yeah, so, I think because my approach in life is much more upfront and "let's sit and talk through this" that the South seems to welcome that a lot more for me than any other place that I've experienced. That,

and, yeah I just don't—in particular the diversity of this state. Like I love... This weekend I'm driving up to the mountains, you know, a few weeks before that, I was on the coast, so having that sort of geographic diversity within driving distance is essential to my well-being as well.

LH: Yeah I appreciate that as well. Um... What time is it?

MZS: 4:21.

LH: Okay. How have your feelings about your body image changed over time?

MZS: Whew!

[laughter]

LH: A really different one.

MZS: That's [unintelligible].

LH: Sorry, it's one of the last questions that I haven't...

MZS: Oh, wow. So the first thing that comes to mind in terms of dramatic shifts with body image and perception is hair. For many communities of color, our connection to our hair is at the forefront. And I, again, grew up with a grandmother telling me, "I don't want you to marry a Black man because I don't want my grandchildren to have bad hair!" And like this fascination with good hair. And you know growing up with a sister that put everything – anybody recommended something to make her hair better, she would put it in her hair, including mayonnaise and rotten avocados and egg yolks, and all sorts of... To this day I hate mayonnaise because of that. And I grew up literally ironing my hair on an ironing board, and I think we used chemical relaxer, maybe once or twice as young girls, which is again, like "Ugh!" And now, it's been a while but getting to the place of like, I love my crazy-ass, frizzy, curly, sometimes all over the place hair! And it's especially come to the forefront with

my 9-year-old niece, who has been addicted to flat-ironing her hair. She doesn't like to leave the house without her hair flat-ironed. My sister, who's still very much into that conditioned mentality and flat-irons her own hair... They never wear their hair curly. And their hair is extremely curly. And the messages of, you know, "good hair is straight hair that looks like white hair" versus "bad hair is curly hair that looks like 'native' hair," whatever. So trying to figure out how to have that conversation with my niece in a way that is about fostering positive self-identity and not trying to crush her little spirit, and letting her have her own space to like, "I like this, this looks cool to me" is essential.

Other than that, I've had the good fortune since I was 16, 17, of stepping into this body that was given to me and feeling quite comfortable in it. Like I went through my own like, "tits are so small and I have no ass," which is unusual for Puerto Rican women who are known for their bodacious booties. [laughs] In my family we're straight, like there's no hips, there's no ass, there's no breasts, and I've been pretty comfortable with that. I think part of is when I was a teenager, my best friend who was Puerto Rican had huge breasts, and they were such a burden for her. And she wasn't a big woman, but she had these huge breasts, and so I always felt like my frame felt really light and comfortable to me. And um, yeah, have only continued to feel stronger in this body, and the role-laying, the sort of role-play in terms of sexual dynamics with women, and also the role-play in terms of dressing in drag, has only allowed me to play with this body even more, and it's been a positive exploration.

LH: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't touched on?

MZS: [laughs] I think we've touched it all, Luke.

LH: [laughs] I mean, you know...

MZS: Yeeeah. We've touched a lot.

LH: Yeah. [laughs] Alright. Who would you interview for the Heirs collection if it were going... I know right now, this phase of the Heirs Project is ending, but, you know, if there are other opportunities to collect stories in the future?

MZS: Who would I interview?

LH: Or, you know, who would you want somebody to interview?

MZS: Oh. Several people come to mind. I know Leah Wise... is she one of the Heirs?

LH: I don't think so.

MZS: Ok. I'd love to know more of her story, and she's a talker, like overall, but I know she was around back during SNCC [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee] and played some important roles in community-building back then. Cynthia Brown is one of those people that I've heard snippets of her story, but I'd love to like, really know.

LH: She's an Heir.

MZS: She is an Heir? Yeah. Um, what else comes to mind? Oh goodness. There are some young people that are really interesting to me. Tahz Walker from the Stone House, the little bits that I've gotten to know about him, and Santos Flores, who works at SEEDS. Just amazing young folk that I'm so inspired by. Going even younger than that, there are a couple of youth that I had gotten to know through my like, "Hey I'm queer and Latina," who I'd love to be inspired by them in that way, but, yeah. This is it, right? It's me and who else?

LH: Um, Vivette.

MZS: Oh! Vivette. I'm glad she's on that list.

LH: Yeah, I think she's the only one that's still—These are the last two we're finishing, yours and Vivette's.

MZS: Yeah. Oh it'd be so cool to hear her story.

LH: Yeah. How was this process for you?

MZS: Good. Really good. I mean it's easy for me to talk about, obviously [laughs] it's easy for me to talk about intimate things and my life story. Mm, I think one thing that we didn't touch on... One of the reasons that I feel really open to talking about these intimate pieces of my story is that I am a survivor of child sexual abuse, and so this culture of silence that is so pervasive around that issue in particular, but it kind of oozes out into anything else that's "too personal to talk about," I'm really committed to shattering that and to creating spaces that fosters real conversation. And of course I believe that step one is to offer that level of vulnerability and openness that encourages that in other people, and so it's a great process and it's a pleasure with you, since I know you and appreciate you from outside of this, it makes it even easier.

LH: Alright. Well, I really appreciate you sharing.

MZS: Yeah.

LH: Thanks.

MZS: Good luck!