

Renee Lopez

Disability Activist and the Latino Culture

*Interview conducted by
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Biography

Renee Lopez was born in 1961, to Joe and Trenee Lopez in Austin, Texas. Renee was the first born child to Joe and Trenee Lopez, born with a lot of deformities in her body made it very difficult for her mother and doctors to give them a diagnosis; eventually she was diagnosed with Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita (AMC).

Topics discussed

- Disability experience in Mexico
- Adolescence and disability
- Warm Springs and the role of education
- Latino culture, disability, and identity formation
- Disability experience in college
- Relationship with ADAPT
- Protest participation early 2000s
- Participation in other organizations
- Recent activity with ADAPT
- Women of color, Disability, and Identity
- Spirituality, Religion, and Disability

Interviewer: Can you explain what that is? (AMC)

Lopez: the pathology of the disease is unknown, it is a bone and joint disorder; doctors say that it could be caused by genetics or it has been involved when there is no amniotic fluid in the sack; so the joints stiffen (cannot grow or bend). Usually the child is born with certain characteristics such as they can't bend arms or the elbows, also born with clubbed feet, no ankle movement, and straight knees. That was my beginning, I started having corrective surgeries when I was seven months old, the first they did was to correct my clubbed feet, so I was in a body cask probably for the first year of my life. My parents took me to see Dr. Kermit Fox an orthopedic specialist here in Austin. Dr. Fox took me under his wings and decided that I needed a lot of corrective surgery. One of the surgeries he did was for me to be able to bend my arms at the elbow. Before the surgery, my arms were straight down to the side, which is common and typical of AMC, and by doing that surgery it gave me more function to where I could feed myself and rub my eyes. His idea was that gravity would pull down my arm but the muscle would bring it back up so I would have flexion, but I guess because my joints were contracted, they stay at whatever angle you put them in. I'm not like other people with AMC, because my arms are bent at an angle but others would not have it.

I spent a lot of my childhood at Gonzales Warm Springs Rehabilitation Hospital and I'm not sure why I went there, rather that it was the closest place to Austin for rehabilitation.

Interviewer: Do you know if it was affiliated with Warm Springs in Georgia?

Lopez: I don't know really, I was a child; probably it was, just because of the name but this was in Gonzales, Texas. I would have surgery here in Austin and then I would go to Warm Springs and I would spend months and months there just for physical and occupational therapy. There I learned how to dress myself, using a dressing stick or just coming up with any dressing aid that would make me more independent. I was there from the age of three up to the age of fifteen; at fifteen I had my last surgery on my knee.

Rose: how many surgeries was that?

Lopez: I probably had a good thirty-two surgeries and if you look closely, I have a lot of scars on my arms and legs; so that was the beginning of my life, a lot of it was spent under the knife. When I got to my twenties I had a lot of issues, because it had been a very difficult time I was away from my family, I had to be on my own, and I was dependent on some of the nurses, so I had a lot of issues with that growing up, but now I'm 56; I have matured, grown, my parents are gone and a lot of that has been forgiven. I feel my parents really did right to me.

Interviewer: what was the community like at Gonzales Warm Springs? Interacting with other kids?

Lopez: There were no kids really, I was one of the very few children there, so Warm springs was sort of the catch all rehab and it was around the late 60s early 70s when I was there so, there were a lot of men that had come back from the Vietnam war; that were maimed or had lost a leg. And warm springs had an orthotics department right then and there, they made everything there, now a days you have to send it to San Antonio and they'll send it back, but it was all right there and they made prosthetics, braces, and corsets for people that had broken their necks and backs, there was a lot of leather and brace work being done there.

Interviewer: What was it like to be there? I mean at age three to five?

Lopez: Yeah, I don't have a lot of memory from when I was little, but I know that the first time I was left there I was 3, but know that I got older, it made me grow fast cause I interacted with adults. There were elderly people who had strokes where there, a lot of people with gunshot wounds around the neck

or something like that and they were paralyzed. There were a lot of people that had broken their backs in car accidents before seatbelts, there were no traumatic injuries because like they are now because they didn't survive and there were veterans that came in for prosthetics, to learn how to walk again, a lot of hooks were made around that time.

Interviewer: How did that affect your education?

Lopez: I had trouble catching up, because it seems like most of my childhood was spent adjusting to one place, and once I got adjusted I was taken over, I had to go back home with my family readjust there and go back to elementary school where everyone was able bodied and I was just coming from a place where everyone was disabled and I had to assimilate constantly into those two worlds. In some ways when I had to go to school, if it started in September at times I was lost because I wasn't following the curriculum for my grade age at that time, but I also got individual attention from the teacher that was there, so I got to get ahead because I had a one on one twice a day; were I learned math, reading and English, I really don't know how I managed to get by, I don't know.

Interviewer: Definitely challenging, where you integrated in Austin when you were back in school? How was access?

Lopez: You know what, I woke up at 5am in the morning just thinking about this.

I initially went to school straight to first grade, I don't even know if there was kindergarten, if there was, I wasn't in it for whatever reasons, I might have been in the hospital, but I went straight to Special Ed and I went to GoValle elementary school; predominantly Hispanic, but it was one of or the only school that had special education, so everybody went there. I was remembering it as being a very safe place, we had our own wing, there were two special education classrooms and one of them would focus mainly on learning disabilities or emotional disturbance and the class I was in focused mainly on physical disabilities like CP.

Interviewer: All ages?

Lopez: Yeah pretty much, it was a very comforting place, but we were also kept away from the other kids; I mean we had our own wing, we went and had lunch before the other kids went, and we were back in our classroom before they would go out. I think that they were really protective of us; I think that the fear was that we might have gotten bullied, picked on, or who knows what if we interacted with a normal kid.

One day, my mother came to the classroom and she saw me doing my math using a counting frame and she got really mad at the teacher and said, " Why is she using the counting frame, how is she going to ever learn math if she is using a counting frame; she needs to learn how to do math". I think back then the idea was that, we were being babysat, not so much educated for the future; because what future did we have, so there was no real importance placed on education; I didn't have homework.

After that seems like, I was little so I'm not sure of the chronology of it but at some point they gave me an IQ test and psychological tests, and they decided that I was intelligent enough to go into regular classroom, I really didn't have trouble fitting in, because I was growing up in a neighborhood where there were a lot of kids and you had to interact with them, so it wasn't like I was from another planet.

Interviewer: Did you have younger siblings too?

Lopez: yeah I did

Interviewer: how many?

Lopez: I'm the oldest, so there's three more after me, I have a brother, a sister, and a little brother. That's what I really remember, my mother fighting for getting me mainstreamed into regular classrooms, and I really remember these discussions sort of like, "How is she going to do this? "What if the kids make fun of her?". All these trepidations about getting us mainstreamed because we are so vulnerable and my mother saying, "Well, she'll just have to learn to deal with it, she'll figure it out".

Interviewer: What was your parents background?

Lopez: they were first generation Mexican American, they were both born in the US but grew up in the same neighborhood (Hispanic Community) at east Austin and they were the first generation to graduate from high school and my dad was in the air force and there he became an electronics technician. My mother was a secretary, but my dad found an electronics job for her through a friend, my dad said, "Your mom is really good with her hands", so she worked for IBM putting chassis together; they were both in the electronics industry.

Interviewer: They had quite a lot of education, for the time.

Lopez: Their generation broke through that glass ceiling because their parents were not even literate and they didn't speak English.

Interviewer: From what part of Mexico were they?

Lopez: My grandmother was from Zacatecas Mexico; I remember that because I used to go spend my summers with my grandma there. It was very primitive, it was an outhouse with no electricity, no water up in the mountains you know; but I loved it. You picked the food, you milked the cows; very, very basic, but I had a great time. My father's family I'm not pretty sure of their history but my grandmother was born in the US, she grew up in such a Hispanic community that she knew English but not very well.

Interviewer: And you, did you grew up speaking English or Spanish? or both?

Lopez: When we were little my brother and I only spoke Spanish and my parents wanted that on purpose, they knew English, both were fluent in English and Spanish, but they wanted us to learn Spanish and my grandparents on both sides of the family had a lot of influence on us, so we spoke a lot of it, but my two youngest siblings didn't grow up on that environment so they don't know that much Spanish today.

Interviewer: So, how did you get around as a child, were you using a wheelchair or crutches?

Lopez: I never used a wheelchair, I wore long braces and I couldn't use crutches because my arms wouldn't bend, so I had to learn to walk on sheer balance. I really don't know how I did it, honestly. I remember my family considering it a Christmas miracle. I had my braces on and I was leaning against the couch, next to my dad and all of the sudden I walked to the kitchen and I said, "Mommy can I have a cookie?" or something like that and all of them turned around and said, "Oh my God you're walking".

I don't remember it at all, but one of my uncles that died recently would always say, I was the first one to ever see you walk", but I guess it meant something to him. I really don't have that memory, but I remember everyone kissing me, hugging me, and crying at that time, but I didn't know why. I was too young to know the significance of it, but that's how I walked all the time with braces; I became very adept at walking with a lot of balance and strong back.

It went until 2004, that I fell and broke my hip and then I was starting to get back on my feet and gaining my strength when I fell and broke my knee, and after that I told myself, "I guess my walking days are over", so I started using a wheelchair all the time.

Interviewer: what about getting access to your elementary school, were there stairs?

Lopez: In my elementary school in my Special Ed wing there was a ramp, when I went to fifth grade my class was in a portable and the portable had four steps to go up into it. I swear this is the truth, sometimes I go back and think how did they do that? Every day, I usually got there before class started because I had to ride the Special Ed bus and I had to walk through the school, go down a step; I would lean my back against the wall, put one-foot down gain my balance and then the other foot down, and that's how I would get down that step.

Then I would stand at the foot of the stair and I would start yelling, "Mrs. Ramirez, Mrs. Ramirez" and I did that until she heard me and she would come out and help me; she and my best friend Carmen would help me get up the stairs. I did that every day for nine months. During the spring it wasn't bad, but during winter, Oh my God!!! And my mom never let us miss a class unless we had a fever and there were days there was ice on the ground; I did the usual leaning against the wall, to step down, but there was ice there; and I would pray, "Jesus don't let me fall, don't let me fall". Somehow I didn't, I managed to step down I was very careful; I had a coat on and the wall was made of bricks so it kind of kept me from slipping, it held me kind of like a velcro and it helped me regain my balance to walk over the ice patch.

Then I walked over to the door, the door was close and I would stand there yelling, "Mrs. Ramirez, Mrs. Ramirez" in icy rain, until she heard me and got me up the stairs that was my fifth grade. No thought of accessibility in classroom and it didn't occur to me or my family to ask for accommodations, back then you were just lucky if you were able to go to school.

Interviewer: That was a big deal.

Lopez: it was a big deal, so you weren't going to rock that boat.

Interviewer: What about junior high and high school?

Lopez: It was a little bit better. I was preteen, I had to go wherever there was Special Education, so I never followed my classmates to the following level. I went from GoValle which ended in fifth grade to Casis Elementary for sixth grade; and there they had a really good setup for Special Education. They had an attendant actually, who took care of you, so I didn't have to worry about things like how I'm going to go to the bathroom or drink water, it was a big relief.

Interviewer: Where you on your own before?

Lopez: Yeah

I slipped through that just fine then I had to Lamar Junior High, which is across town and it was like an hour and half bus ride to get over there, and I was in Special Ed there as well. I did well I guess, I made friends, did well in school, I really actually enjoyed school, but I'll tell you this one story.

I was in the honor roll; at the end of the year those that were on the Honor Roll or top 10% of their class got to go to six flags with the band, well the teachers that were involved in that said, "Well Renee is not going to go, it's just too much trouble, we don't want the liability; how is she going to get in the bus?" Mrs. Maroni was my math teacher and she said, "I'll get her on the bus". That's not your job, you can get in trouble for picking up and it became this huge controversy of whether or not I should go.

The Special Ed teacher and my attendant Mrs. Bond and a couple of other teachers fought for me saying, "That I had the right to go", and the other teacher saying, "No, she's not our responsibility we are not going to be helping her get on the rides", Mrs. Maroni is not going to get her on the bus, she just has no business going, she just doesn't belong". It was a big fight, so they decided they would let me go if my Special Ed teacher and attendant went with me and they had to everything for me. So I had to stay with

them, which was fine; we had a great time anyway, I couldn't be with my friends but whatever it takes, we won the fight and I got to go. But I'll never forget that, "We don't want her to go, she's too much trouble" ... it was a horrible feeling.

Interviewer: That is really cool that you had so much support.

Lopez: Yeah, I've been really fortunate that I've had a lot of support in my life; even if it's one person that stand up and says no, I'm standing behind you, but I've been really fortunate.

Interviewer: So you had to go to Special Ed, but you were mainstreamed as much as possible basically?

Lopez: Yeah

Interviewer: How did that breakdown work?

Lopez: I had to go to my Special Ed class first thing in the morning; kind of like a check in. At some point I would make friends and they would help me get off my coat or go to the bathroom, I wasn't there very long and then I would go to my classroom. At lunch the aid came with me, but when she realized I was good on my own, she stopped.

Interviewer: It was more of if you needed help during the day?

Lopez: Yeah, right, right.

That's what happened at Casis and Lamar but at GoValle elementary the poor Hispanic school, they didn't have any of that; it was more of, "Okay you're on your own good luck?".

Interviewer: And high school? You went to?

Lopez: it was so much better. I was much more mature, I knew how to ask for what I needed, they also had aid there. Mrs. Salas, she and I became good friends, I always became good friends with my aids even though they were forty years older than me but somehow I got along with them really well; I loved talking to them. Mrs. Salas and I became really close she was my attendant and she would help me when I needed to go to the bathroom or lunch. At some point I would make friends and she didn't have to help me anymore.

Interviewer: Just going back to your summers in Mexico, what was it like? How was the experience with disability?

Lopez: >topic< Disability experience in Mexico >/topic<

I'm glad you brought that up, because it was a very unique experience. When I would go to the city, we lived in a ranch called, 'Rancho Los Nogales' it was almost like a crossword puzzle of a place, grandma lived over here, aunt lived over there, there was a huge courtyard in the center which I thought was great; I would love to live like that. What they did that they grew pecan trees and peach orchards; that was the way they made a living.

Those pecan trees were huge, the roots you could almost sit on them, they were so thick and amazing, they also had cows, horses, and stuff like that. I started going every summer from when I was ten to up to fourteen and then I went when I was little three to six. The family loved me, adored me, they thought I was someone super special and that I was beautiful and smart and that I was this amazing thing. I didn't know what they saw on me.

When I would go to the city there was a lot of staring not just staring but gawking like I was some type of alien from another planet, but my family took me anyway. A couple of people would try and give me money I wouldn't take it. I thought everything was good until of my cousins that was around my age said, "Sometimes when we go to the town, I feel ashamed of you" and that was the first time I was in shock because I always found her to be one of the most supporting but she didn't like the staring and it made her feel uncomfortable. That is when I started realizing that there was shame attached to disability and the shameful of going out on public and the fact that people are going to ask questions but my parents handled it well, but the extended family had more trouble with it.

Interviewer: How did these kinds of experiences and the scars from surgeries really affected you in your late teens?

Lopez: >topic< Adolescence and disability >/topic<

Yeah... I had a really hard time when I hit 16, 17, and 18. Those years were really difficult, because that's the time when you start dating and nobody was asking me out but everyone around me was like, "Are you going to the prom? This eye shadow matches this right?" Sometimes I found it really shallow to be talking about these things instead of the revolution, which I found more interesting, but at the same time it was a sense of disconnecting and loneliness because I knew I was not going to go and that nobody was interested in me or ask me out. Those were the years I became really shy, I don't know why, but I did. High school was really difficult for me; I couldn't wait to get out.

Interviewer: That makes a lot of sense.

Lopez: Yeah

Interviewer: What did you get taught about disability growing up in Gonzales Warm Springs? Did they talk about navigating the world?

Lopez: > topic< Warm Springs and the role of education>/ topic<

No, not really, I actually developed a lot of abandonment issues because my parents would go; I think they told them ... you know how you with kids, get them involved with something and then you walk out and they don't see you leave? That would happen to me. Go pick out a candy bar that you want, and I would turn around and they were gone. I didn't know what to do and if you cried this is what I remember the most; you got punished, you couldn't go to recreation which was the down time we had; were we played games, listened to music on the jukebox; I really liked recreation, so for me that was a big punishment, so learned not to cry. Needless to say I had to go to therapy, to resolve all that.

Interviewer: Do you think Latino culture shaped your parent's identity, the community or your identity?

Lopez: >topic< Latino culture, disability, and identity formation>/ topic<

I think it did.

Interviewer: How about disability?

Lopez: Trying to get over disability, was such a negative thing; you know they didn't like it when I was out in public because people got uncomfortable and let my parents know, "Why are you bringing her out here, why do we have to look at her?" Why don't you put her away; that kind of thing. I remember my mother, life was hard first she had kids and she had to take care of me all the time. I remember one of her friends whom I thought loved me said, "Why don't you just put her away; then you don't have to worry about her, they have places for people like her." Because someone in her family, their son fell of a

wing and hit his head and I think he developed severe CP or maybe mental retardation I am not sure; something went wrong.

Interviewer: some kind of head injury.

Lopez: Head injury, yeah and they put him in a state school. Now you don't have to worry about it. My mother was like, "No, I'm not going to do that". And there were times when the Mexicans give money to the poor; alms, so I would be like at church just getting out and some Mexican man would come over and hand me a quarter or fifty cents and to me I was like, "Cool I can get a coke now" and my mother was like, "No we don't need your money", and the guy would just walk away and she would tell me, "Don't take money from anybody" and I was like, "Mom that was fifty cents, I could've bought some taquitos and she was like No!!! Never take money from strangers, you don't need it, you have pride, they are doing it because they feel like you are a beggar and that's what they have in Mexico, but we are not in Mexico and we don't need to beg for money," so I was like, "oh okay".

She was a very proud woman, I was also considered a punishment to my parents for a past sin, because they eloped; they were engaged to someone else.

Interviewer: WOW!!

Lopez: They met at a party and it was like, "You are the love of my life" and they took off one night, got married and then a year and a half later here I was. Everyone else was like "Aha, Aha, see that's what you get," but my mom said, "You know, I never believed that, because when you were born you brought the feuding families together and we became a whole unit; after that my grandmothers made peace, everything was forgiven, it all became to taking care of Renee" and they helped out a lot.

Interviewer: Why do you think your parents had such a different view of your disability?

Lopez: I think just because they were slightly more educated, they didn't fall for the old wives' tales; my mother said that she saw me and said, "No, this is no punishment; it's going to be difficult but not a punishment, how can such a beautiful baby be a punishment"? My dad also told me that when they to me home, after they realized there was nothing that could be done; no manual to tell you what to do, just take her home and hope for the best. He said, "your mom and I took you home that night and just stared at you and said what a beautiful, beautiful, baby you were and we were so in love with you, we were going to do anything; whatever to make you better".

Interviewer: You graduated high school and went to UT, so you were there probably in the midst of an exciting period at UT.

Lopez: Yeah

Interviewer: Related to disability

Lopez: I went in... when did I started, it's been so long 81' I want to say and I was scared to death but I was also excited because I thought I was finally leaving behind childhood, which was driving me crazy.

Interviewer: So, did you take some time off?

Lopez: I think that just a summer... no maybe I took that fall off.

Interviewer: What year where you in?

Lopez: >topic< Disability experience in college>/ topic<.

1961 and I graduated in 1979 (high school) and I started school in the 80s. That was a real eye opener. I moved into a dorm, and I didn't know what I was doing. I had no clue of what I was doing, but luckily there was a vocational rehab counselor that was there at UT to help the students and her name was Darlene and she was really great. She would help you through all the process; so she helped me get and adjust to the dorm which is where I met Nancy; who you are going to interview later and we were kind of caddy cornered across the hall and Nancy had already been there for two years, so she knew the ropes. She kind of became my big sister and that was the first time I had ever hired an attendant on my own; to be my roommate and to take care of me and I didn't know what I was doing you know.

I didn't know how much to ask her to do, I was embarrassed to have her help me to the bathroom, but that was the impotence for me to learn to take care of myself and that's when I learned how to use the dressing stick they made for in OT at Warm Springs back in 1971; that I never used, so I was like where is that stick they told me I could use to pull up my pants. That's when I learned to take myself to the bathroom, but I didn't know how to be a boss, I was so focused on being like that I didn't know how to be the person in control, so I didn't know how to ask for what I needed. I didn't know how to say what my expectations were, so with no direction; the attendant just kind of went with whatever; rough shot and when I didn't come home I was still in my braces and my feet were swelling up and it was two o'clock in the morning and what was I going to do? That was the night I learned how to take my clothes off by myself and get myself into a night gown.

It took me two hours with a friend of mine on the phone saying, "you can do it", "now what are you doing?" "well got my pants down" and so on, she stayed with me the whole night while I did that and two hours later I was in my night gown and in bed.

Interviewer: WOW!!

Lopez: She (attendant) comes in the morning, "Oh I feel like I owe you an explanation" and I said, "Oh no you don't". I was brought up to not make waves you know, you just take what's given to you and shut up, so I was glad she was there and she got me up in the morning and I was able to go to class, but I learned a lot from her; not being a good attendant when I needed her; that I was able to take care of those needs and I became more and more independent to where I was in graduate school and I was working on my master's degree and I lived in efficiency by myself and I live by myself up to this day.

Interviewer: It's kind of the reverse of your pretty long story.

Lopez: Yeah, I still need an attendant, but I know how to have an attendant now, you know. How to have scheduled what I need; timed on this day you are going to do this, Wednesday you work clothes, Thursday you check the mail and Friday... you know you have the schedule, so I was able to work for thirty years because of an attendant.

Interviewer: What did you major in college?

Lopez: My BA was liberal arts which pretty much means that I had no idea what I wanted to do, it was in psychology and I was really, really interested. My true goal was to get a PHD and put up a shingle or be a school counselor, one of the two because I felt like I had enough experience that I could be of some use to people coming up, going through the school system, but that didn't happen. I got my master's in education but then I couldn't get a job, it was the late 80s; maybe 1988, there was a hiring freeze, it was a bad time economically and I couldn't even get a job with MHMR, everything was frozen and eventually a friend of mine Susana that I knew at UT was working for an agency called 'Disability Determination Services' and she said, "come work here, it's an easy job" she kind of showed me the ropes and what they expected and stuff like that.

I put in my application, they never called me for an interview because there was this ongoing freeze and then six months later they did call me and I had already met my six months' probation and The Texas Workforce Commission were I was helping people find jobs that weren't there. So I went for the interview and I got the job and it was easy and I understood it because I had been on that side of Medicaid, so I understood the whole process and I became really, really, good at it. Very adapt and I moved my way up and became a trainer and I was a trainer for the last ten years; I worked there.

Interviewer: So before we go on talking about your careers, are there any other few things that you experienced in college? Grad school?

What was the community like, at UT?

Lopez: College community?

Interviewer: Particularly disability?

Lopez: Well you know, I became very involved with the disability community more so than I did with the regular classroom, because we were so like always housed together. There was the handicap wing, you know what I mean, it was all disability in one row and it was kind of like being in a disability sorority. The other side were the men where, it was the same thing, a whole row of disabled men so we did a lot of things together.

Interviewer: and was that a really diverse group of disabilities? Or was it mainly people with mobility impairments?

Lopez: it was diverse, but a lot of the people had birth disabilities; one person had spina bifida, Nancy muscular dystrophy, I had AMC, mostly from birth. I think that there was a girl that had a broken back and acquired paraplegia.

Interviewer: What about blindness and deafness?

Lopez: No, they kind of had their own click too... yeah we were pretty cliquish.

Interviewer: Where you involved in some of the advocacy at UT?

Lopez: Yeah, my friend Nancy got me involved with some other people there, we started a group called, 'People against Barriers' (PAB). One of the things we wanted to fight with the university was that we had to pay for transportation, the bus service; but they weren't accessible, so we couldn't ride it, so it felt like we shouldn't have to pay that; especially since we didn't have any money to begin with and that was part of our tuition, so that's were that started. Of course the university said, "well you don't have to ride it but everyone has to pay, you don't have to ride it, it's just there, but yeah other people have a choice we don't have a choice and we still have to pay and that put me on the road of being able to speak up and say, "You know what, this is wrong; we need a ramp over here; this door doesn't open, we can't reach the water fountain".

Interviewer: The bathroom?

Lopez: they started modifying before I got there so they were accessible bathrooms.

Interviewer: What about the classrooms?

Lopez: Oh my God the classrooms. I had one class that I had to seat on the stage next to the professor, facing the class because that was the only entrance so you walked in and the stage was right there; right on the center, but you had to take some steps down to the seating, so there was no other way so of course I couldn't go down the steps, so I sat up on top, listening to the professor. Another classroom I

went to, just had a really small cut out for a chair that if you were not a good driver or if you were spastic or something, one wrong move and you were going down those stairs, so you had to back up very, very, carefully. The ramps were very narrow and people would park their bikes on there, bike racks and we were blocked; we couldn't get down the ramp so, we started advocating for that putting signs up that said, "Do not park your bike on the ramps".

Interviewer: How did the university respond to the activism against the buses?

Lopez: initially not very well, that when they said everyone had to pay, it was part of the tuition, but we didn't have a choice and it continued on after I left, so I was there for the beginning of it but not for the end of it. Every time you go against a university or some huge entity like that, it takes time because you have to figure out who to get to, and do all the promotion and the speaking. You have to do a lot of advocacy and then go back a week later to make sure you didn't forget writing letter and yeah it's a lot of work.

Interviewer: did you guys see some success while you were there? In terms of ramps and other access or signs I guess.

Lopez: Yeah, I really felt that they were listening especially accessibility, there were some things that were, the new buildings that were going up were already being considered very accessible , the older buildings we had a lot of trouble with, a lot of them just had stairs so to go to one classroom you had to go all the way around the building cause it was like a two level to go in and through the entrance to get to your classroom, and go all the way around again to take the business building elevator to go up to the second floor cross the courtyard so you came in through that door so you could get to the classroom.

Interviewer: Did they move classes for you?

Lopez: No.

Interviewer: Did you ever asked?

Lopez: That's the thing, it never occurred to me to ask.

Interviewer: Interesting.

Lopez: I didn't become an advocate until I realized I could ask.

Interviewer: When was that?

Lopez: When I got to college.

Interviewer: okay, so while in college; did they move classes for you?

Lopez: No, but I did know how to ask, and I don't think my peers knew to ask either, we complained about it like people do and we lived in just a dorm and there was no automatic door for example so we sat there and waited door somebody top come by, and "can you open the door please?". That's how we got I and out of the building.

Interviewer: How about getting into your room?

Lopez: Those were accessible, two bunk beds on each side and I didn't like it, I felt very claustrophobic in that room, I only lasted in the dorms one semester, then I moved to an apartment.

Interviewer: Tell us about your career; you worked educating social security disability clients?

Lopez: Yeah right.

Interviewer: Tell us more about that.

Lopez: I really enjoyed the job; I liked it, I was good at it, I got a lot of merit raises and stuff like that. I was able to make friends; really good friends over the years I was there and I remember when I first got hired; I could feel the murmuring going around, "Is she going to be able to do this job?" ... I could feel it.

Interviewer: Were there other people with disabilities?

Lopez: No, there was a woman who was there before me and her name was Carol and she did everything with her feet; she had polio and that affected her arms, so they were really weak, so she couldn't use them, but she learned how to use her feet, she adjudicated using her feet. And so, she had to retire or quit because she had tendonitis on her toes; obviously from over using them and then here I come, I could feel the idea of: "is she going to be able to do this, but I proved them wrong you know". I knocked myself out working really hard, because this job has to work, it has to; this is my one chance to prove that I'm employable that I can earn money and that I can be an excellent employee and I would go in on Saturdays and Sundays on my own time to work.

Interviewer: To make sure you would stay on top?

Lopez: Yeah... I really didn't have to, but I felt like I had to because I've always done that.

Interviewer: What kind of assistive technology did you use?

Lopez: None.

Interviewer: So you were writing by hand both in college and at work?

Lopez: Yeah by hand; you can see how I hold a pencil, that kind of developed on his own. I'll tell you this quick story. My mother had gone to the Special Ed classroom and I got home that evening and we were supposed to practice our letters and stuff like that, my brother and I. And I said, "Oh mom, I don't have to practice writing because Mrs. Briselle said that because of my hand I don't have to worry about writing". My mom cursed like a sailor, "What, I don't give a @\$#%.... what Mrs. Briselle says you are going to pick up that pencil and you are going to learn how to write, and you are going to write well". Practicing writing was part of my homework routine every night, but I did write.

Interviewer: It took a lot longer right?

Lopez: No, I learned to be very... yeah.

Interviewer: Oh okay, I was curious about note taking and stuff like that.

Lopez: I was wearing myself out with note taking because I couldn't write that fast, so what I would do and I became very instinctual about it was; I would look at someone who had taken copious notes and I would approach that person and say, "Do you mind if I copy your notes?" and we would go to the copier and for ten cents I would copy their notes, and that's how I got them and then I would implement my own to that.

Interviewer: So, you can tell us more about the kind of work you did for social security?

Lopez: Yeah, someone would fill for disability benefits and the cause would be assign and then my job was to collect the medical evidence that supports not only their claim but to see if they qualify under the social security guidelines to meet the criteria for disability.

Interviewer: And this would be SSDI?

Lopez: And SSI... both.

So I learned to read a lot of medical records and vocational evaluations and I wrote residual functional capacity forms like, "you have a bad back and yes, you have a degenerative disease but you can bend forward... so you should be able to return to your past job as a secretary or whatever". So, you had to do that kind of assessment and evaluation.

Interviewer: Oh okay!

So you have to know the clients pretty well, in some ways, but we got claims from all over the state; so we didn't meet with them one on one, but I would talk to them a lot on the phone.

Interviewer: I'm curious, federal partner but administrative?

Lopez: Yeah

Interviewer: Oh okay!

Lopez: I got paid through the state; I was a state employee, contracted by the government to do these services.

Interviewer: Oh, okay that makes sense.

So, what are some of the memories that stood out from your work?

Lopez: I fell in love for the first time and I surprised people that I was so good at my job that I surpassed some people; and they were in awe. I didn't want to be in awe, I just knew that I had to do it. They thought I couldn't that's all it was. I made good money, I was able to buy a house, I was able to drive a van; which I still do now, and I was able to go to Hawaii, New York and travel.

Interviewer: A good life.

Lopez: Yeah you know, I was able to live a good life because of that and I made some very dear and close friends; that are still friends up to this day; even though we retired.

Interviewer: Did the department end up hiring more people with disabilities?

Lopez: You know they tried and it didn't work. You have to be able to speak very well because you talk to claimants on the phone all the time and someone with a speech impediment didn't do very well; and another person came in and said he could use a computer system called 'Dragon Speak' I think and they were willing to do the accommodations; this was after the ADA, but it turned out he did not know how to work 'Dragon Speak' so it became an issue with him not knowing how to use it and he said he did. Some just couldn't do the work they got behind, you have to be able to think fast, read fast and that was the thing.

Interviewer: I can imagine; mastering some really detailed regulations.

Lopez: Yeah lots of them... extremely.

Interviewer: So, where you doing some activism part time? While you were working?

Lopez: >topic< Relationship with ADAPT >/topic<

Yeah you know I've sort of been on the peripheral of ADAPT; not a full pledge member traveling person because I was working but when they needed numbers or a voice you know; an advocate, protest somewhere I would take off from work and I would go join them; to add to the force.

Interviewer: How did you connect with ADAPT?

Lopez: Oh my God!! I've known them forever; I really don't know where it began. It's kind of like when you know somebody but you can't remember exactly when you met them.

Interviewer: 1984, I believe is when ADAPT TEXAS started.

Lopez: Yeah, I don't think I knew them then, it was after college for sure... I think it was after college for sure. I don't remember, they've just always been there... always.

Interviewer: What protest stood out to you?

Lopez: The what?

Interviewer: From all the protests you attended which one stood out the most?

Lopez: >topic< Protest participation early 2000s >/topic<

The one that stood out the most to me was, 'My Medicaid Matters'. Back when they first tried to cut Medicaid and I remember being on Medicaid when I was in college; that was my insurance and I didn't use it much, I was very healthy, maybe once out of five years, but it was there and I was also a recipient for SSI and I also lived in section eight housing, so I had all the services you know. You know how tenuous they are; like any second they can cut it and that's it and you're homeless. So I didn't want to see that happen to anybody. There was going to be this huge march that was going to take place across Congress Bridge in the capital and it was like 40 degrees outside. Nancy and I had a sweatshirt, a t-shirt, a shawl and a huge kind of red riding hood looking cloak; I looked like a tank going down the street and a yellow hat that said, "My Medicaid Matters" and I put out there to help with that you know.

Interviewer: Do you remember what decade that was?

Lopez: That wasn't that long ago, maybe 2005.

Interviewer: You've served on quite few different boards, recently right?

Lopez: Yeah

Interviewer: VSA and H.A.N.D. Can you tell us about VSA?

Lopez: > topic< Participation in other organizations >/ topic<

When I retired I realized I could do work and I always wanted to and not worry about money or making a living out of it, so I donated my time. I'm on the board of VSA, and VSA is a state organization of arts and disability; you know that already right?

Interviewer: yeah, I think we met with them our first year at UTA.

Lopez: I love VSA and I love what they stand for. I joined their opening lines and opening doors program; as a participant and it really helped me get back in touch with myself because being a bureaucrat for thirty years, you kind of forget on how to think on human terms sometimes; anyways I thought it was fun to play with poetry and words; tell my story. I think that if it weren't for them I think I would be less able to share my story with you like I am now. So yeah I was a participant with opening lines and opening doors and I found a lot of joy telling my story you know because I had never put it together before you know and then I also went to see 'Actual Lives' a play of stories of people with disabilities put together by people with disabilities.

Interviewer: you know Eugene Roberts? We met yesterday.

Lopez: Oh okay.

Interviewer: I haven't gotten to Actual Lives yet, but...

Lopez: Actual Lives just blew me away, I was like Oh My God this is great; I want to be part of this, but by the time I retired it wasn't around anymore. But opening lines and opening doors was similar, so that's why I joined that, but because that's not all VSA does, I volunteered on one of their summer classes and stuff like that. So when they asked me if I was interested on being part of the board I said yeah; so I'm on the board of that now.

Interviewer: So, H.A.N.D?

Lopez: Yeah I was on the board of H.A.N.D, helping age needing disabled; Nancy asked me to be on it. I was a client of H.A.N.D at one time and I found that they had one of the best attendant in home services of any agency; so I was proud to be part of that.

Interviewer: What did they do? As a broad

Lopez: you know they serve the poor really, they apply for grants and then they would use that money to provide services for people who couldn't pay, like the elderly or the severely disable. Then they also brought in supporting services for people that were undergoing chemotherapy; for people that had breast cancer. That's what I really like about it, it's not a truly nonprofit and yeah we would have to go out there and search for money and beg for money like you do for nonprofits but the services they provide because of that it's really useful to the community.

Interviewer: So what do you do now that you're on the board?

Lopez: Well now it's actually under the hospices of meals on wheels, they dissolved the board, so there's no board anymore.

Interviewer: What about Accessible Housing Austin?

Lopez: Another one of my passions its Accessible Housing Austin. We have a project right now that we are working on, it's going to be a 27-unit apartment, 3 floor complex; that is going to be I don't remember the percentages of the ones that are going to be accessible and the ones that are accessible will be made accessible so hopefully we will provide housing for people with disabilities that are on limited income or subsidized housing.

Interviewer: where would that be located?

Lopez: On Berkman Dr. and Gaston Pl. northeast Austin.

Interviewer: We were just there yesterday, with Eugene Roberts; he knows where that is.

Lopez: Yeah right... he lives there. He was there to help us when we went up against the NIMBI. You know what NIMBI is right?

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Lopez: they don't want us there; they had a lot of concerns so we ask Eugene and other people that live in that community to come support us when we met with the neighborhood association.

Interviewer: Wow... so what were they particularly concerned about?

Lopez: Increased crime; one lady said that the fire department is really, really, concerned with the three floor complex and I said, "what are they concerned about?" I mean are they afraid there's going to be someone on a wheelchair on the third floor and they are not going to be able to get to them? And she's

like, "Oh no" its unbiased fear to me. They are going to add to the crime and you know... we are also going to take housing vouchers from foster kids when they age out, so we are going to take those too...

Interviewer: Oh really

Lopez: People with mental health issues of course they can live on their own you know. And their concern is, are you going to have somebody there that's going to watch over them? We are like no; we are not a state hospital; we are not going to have a nurse; it's just a place to live in. they're going to be able to live on their own; they're not going to hurt you.

Interviewer: WOW

Lopez: Yeah that's the kind of crap; you know.

Interviewer: So how long is Accessible Housing Austin going to be working on that project?

Lopez: I just came on two years ago and since then they have been working on it; we run into issues because we have to meet certain codes and then we had to switch architects at mid-string because one quit so we had to bring another one.

Then there were some issues with how many apartments we were going to make accessible and also having to be able to bring in the market value because that's how we are going to sustain it. I'm telling you we sat down with the architect at the minutiae of how much counter space do we put on the right and how much on the left, if it would be better on the right next to the refrigerator or would it be better on the left by the stove. To me that was fun; I had a lot of fun doing that, now it's just the matter of raising the money.

Interviewer: Yes, it's a huge project you have to raise money for.

Lopez: Considering that we are a very small non-profit organization, it almost feels like David and Goliath, but we have a really good executive director; unfortunately, she's gone, but we have a new one and hopefully she can keep pushing and pushing and finding grants and stuff like that.

Interviewer: That's incredible and you have also been doing evacsim; correct? And you retired four years ago?

Lopez: Has it been that long?

Interviewer: 2013

Lopez: It was January 2014.

Interviewer: 2014, okay. Three and a half years.

Lopez: Yeah.

Interviewer: What stuff have you've been doing with ADAPT?

Lopez: >topic< Recent activity with ADAPT>/topic<.

With ADAPT I go to their meetings, I help with planning certain activities and protests. I also helped planning the ADA twenty-fifth anniversary commemoration that we had.

Interviewer: Can you tell us about that?

Lopez: That was really awesome, we go to use the Bob Bullock top floor and we got speakers that came and spoke. We provided everyone with a lunchbox, we had stories, pictures all over the place detailing the story of ADAPT and ADA.

Interviewer: WOW

Lopez: It was really awesome.

Interviewer: That's great!

Lopez: Music, we had dancers with Parkinson's, they danced in chairs you know.

Interviewer: That's really cool!

Lopez: Yeah

Interviewer: Do you know where that history went afterwards?

Lopez: I think it's going to go to the ADAPT history museum.

Interviewer: Good, good.

Lopez: Stephanie is doing that.

Stephanie and I, we both are in the Accessible Housing, she asked me to be on that, but she's also doing this on the side.

Interviewer: Okay

What kind of protest did you help plan with ADAPT?

Lopez: You know, last summer the Texas Civil Rights Project had some summer interns that wanted to focus on non-profits and civil rights and disability issues. So we went down Rainey street and went through all of it, since it's not very accommodating and accessible. There's a lot of rocks; to get to a food truck for example and once you get through the rocks of course you are going to sink. We went through different restaurants that weren't accessible or were accessible and once you got through the door they had so many tables that you couldn't get through or the bar tables were high with maybe one or two, but they were also taken. Bathroom accessibility, we saw several as un-accessible and we had a press conference after that.

I hate suing people, that's not my thing, but that's one way of getting them to do it, unfortunately. They get a letter first and then if they make the changes, we drop it and then if they don't we go to the next level. We don't get any money out of it really, maybe two hundred dollars; but not really.

Interviewer: That makes sense.

Lopez: Yeah, that was the last thing we did. You know they are a strong core group, so they really don't need me a lot in their planning, but I did sit a while to help them go meet so and so because we want to talk about this; the requirements for people that work over forty hours a week; have to get paid over time, could ruin the attending care because a lot of them work over time, but the agencies don't have the money to pay double because that's not a lot when given to provide the services. We went to talk to ... I don't remember who it was honestly, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah that makes sense.

Lopez: Stuff like that, I'm sure there's others, but I can't think right now. The Attendant Care Appreciations is another one.

Interviewer: That's great!

Lopez: Nancy is more involved with that one though.

Interviewer: Okay. We look forward talking to her about it.

Lopez: That's her passion raising the wages for attendant care; its mine too, but she's actually working very closely to Cathy on that project.

Interviewer: That makes sense.

We are going to get Cathy on another trip.

Lopez: Yeah.

Interviewer: Its curious, totally from interaction, but as a Latina with disabilities; probably because we've had students work on women of color, disabilities, and identity has that changed your identity at all?

Lopez: >topic< Women of color, Disability, and Identity >/topic<.

I have less trouble with my Mexican American identity that I did with my disability because I experienced prejudice from all sides; sometimes more from my own culture you know. Yeah I just think that from a Hispanic community I had more trouble. I was telling this to a friend of mine the other day; I discovered Frida Kahlo and her art. She depicting so much pain and agony and for the first time I felt like I had someone that would speak to that and that I could identify with; and that opened my whole mind to it; the culture of being a woman with a disability, but also Mexican American.

Interviewer: Yeah, just last year I got interested in art and disability.

Lopez: Yeah, you know what; you should put that together. I love art, but Frida's art really spoke to me; the first time I saw it.

Interviewer: Wow that's great.

Is there any questions or topics we should've addressed and we didn't?

Lopez: I don't know if you've ever talked about spirituality or religion?

Interviewer: Go ahead

Lopez: >Spirituality, Religion, and Disability >/topic<.

I was also on the board... I was actually on the advisory board of a project called, Austin Interfaith Inclusion Network and we worked on kind of like a booklet or handout; on how churches and religions could include people with disabilities; because it is kind of like the last frontier and it should've been the first but it's the last because many churches and religions are either not accessible, they don't provide support to the families that go to the church and when I was taking catechism at my church the class was down in the basement, so they would have to carry me down and bring me up the stairs every time and I was left behind one time forty degrees and raining ; again. That was the story I told when they started the project about how it felt to wanting to be part of your religious community; which is very important in many communities and yet is the last place you're actually accepted or people with disabilities shunt any kind of religion because they've always been tried to be healed.

Why aren't you walking, if you had enough faith; pray hard enough, we will pray for you, get up and walk and stuff like that. That turns the off completely from religion; so I find that to be a really important topic and I don't think it's often covered.

Interviewer: Are you practicing catholic now?

Lopez: No... just because it didn't feed mi spiritually as a person. Now I go to Unity Church of the Hills; it's more of a spiritual finding; it incorporates Buddhism; different types of religions.

Interviewer: Is it kind of Unitarianish?

Lopez: Not Unitarian, I think that just unity. I don't even know what Unitarian is, but Unity is about a personal connection with God as you feel he is or whatever, even a woman if you think he is. It's kind of like the twelve steps you know; God is you understanding, nothing is forced on you.

Interviewer: That is great.

Lopez: We read a lot of Buddhism, Tish Nat-Hong, philosophy stuff like that, but you make your own decisions.

Interviewer: That's cool.

Lopez: Yeah, I really like it.

Interviewer: So, has Austin Inner Faith Inclusion Network had any impact; changing how religious organizations?

Lopez: I know that we had a couple of huge meetings; symposiums and we got a lot of people the first time around; rabbis, Hindus...

Interviewer: (interrupts) That's great.

Lopez: Because we were incorporating everybody; some of the older religions like Hinduism are still lagging behind and accepting people with disabilities, so I think it really made a big difference to that group; in the churches that are here because they promised they were going to go back and look over at their church or whatever regarding disability, because they had never thought about it. They don't come to our church, well that's because it's not accessible, so for those older religions I think it was an eye opening experience. like the Dell Jewish Community center is perfectly accessible, so there's were we always held our meetings, but Michael Dell is more contemporary, so he built it. The Catholics are really; especially the old churches, when I go home and I go with my family to the church I grew up in I still have to sit in a little corner over by the baptismal fountain. And if they are having a baptismal that day, I'm seating like this; because they are all in my way and I can't sit in the center because the priest walks by with the cross beginning and end of mass or I have to sit way in the back with the crying babies which I hate, so I rather sit in the front by the baptismal fountain; it's still not accessible, but they did put in a ramp.

Interviewer: that's good.

Anything else?

Lopez: No ... Just I think that spirituality is a topic you might want to incorporate later because I think that a lot of people with disabilities do practice some form of religion, or something is important to them or maybe it isn't and why? Maybe because they weren't accepted; it would be interesting to find out.

Interviewer: Absolutely

Lopez: Yeah

Interviewer: So you're also on the board... (Lopez interrupts)

Lopez: I'm also on the board for Parking Mobility; which is an app that you download and you can take pictures of violators that park on accessible parking and they get sent to law enforcement, they get sent to court or an issued citation and you can lower the amount by taking a class; an educational course, that's basically it in a nutshell. I'm on the board there too, because since I started driving many years ago; one of the issues I had was finding accessible parking constantly. I mean it's just, and even now that Austin has grown so much it's almost impossible and a lot of its because of people who violate. They park there with invalid permits or they park across the lines and block me in so I thought this was a good thing to promote. Mack asked me to be on the board of Parking Mobility; to me this is going from historical issues to futuristic; that's why I'm on the board.