**Margarita Ortega**

**Narrator**

**Sue Purchase**

**Interviewer**

**January 13th, 2019**

**Open Book**

Margarita Ortega -MO

Sue Purchase -SP

**SP:** This is Sue Purchase. I am doing the interview with Margarita Ortega. We’re at Open Book. It is January 13th at about three o’clock. Margarita would you introduce yourself and that that you give permission for this and your name and address?

**MO:** My name is Margarita Ortega. I give, I give permission to to do this interview. I am a Little Earth Resident. I live at Little Earth. I was born and raised there.

**SP:** I should say this is the Opioid Oral History Project. So, can you tell me a little bit about, who’s Margarita?

**MO:** I’m just a regular ex-user. I had opportunities growing up that have brought me into different fields and being able to be an advocate for my community. But I, as a child, I grew up in a domestic violence home. My father used to beat my mother a lot. And then he starting beating us, and I grew up with that trauma. I was homeless from ten years old until I was fourteen, I lived in a tent for three and half years. I went through a lot as a kid and at fourteen we moved back to Little Earth. And at Little Earth was where a lot of my traumas and who I was, trying to figure out what it all meant. Why did I grow up in an abusive home? Why did I become homeless? Why…? So I was dealing with all those traumas and I started turning into drug use more rapidly and after that, that's when I pretty much stopped school and then, went and fell down the rabbit hole a lot deeper, and then, I got older when I turned eighteen was when I started seeing things differently. I had a child. I got pregnant, I had a child, I graduated high school. And, after high school I went right back into drugs. I ended up having a surgery. When I ended up having the surgery, that's when I started getting hooked up on opiates.

Can you backtrack just a little bit and talk about you know, how old were you when you first started getting high?

**MO:** I was twelve years old. It was my mother. My mother was the one that gave me my first joint. It was because of, we were already living in tents. Uhm, my mom was being raped by my father and I knew it. Uhm, she was being beaten by my father and I knew it. And the more I tried to talk to my mother about it, to leave him, the more problems it caused. So, to my mom's sense was if she got me high, I wouldn't care just like she didn't care. That I would continue to deal with it just like she deals with it. So that was my first time using. And, I was a lot younger when I started drinking. I was actually like ten. '

**SP:** So you started drinking and then smoking pot?

**MO:** Yeah. When I was ten my mother used to give me drinks to deal with a lot of, to deal with our homelessness, and to deal with a lot of the traumas that was happening cuz even my brother was starting to beat on me. Uhm, and it was becoming normal. Uhm, and then when I started using that was pretty much how I dealt with, that's how I was taught, how to deal with trauma was to use. And, I, continued to keep that with me all the way up until I turned twenty-five. When I turned twenty-five was when I learned that there was a different way of dealing with trauma. That it wasn't drugs and alcohol, that it was another way. It was actually a healing that could happen, which I didn't know about the healing process until I got involved in my culture.

**SP:** What happened at twenty-five?

**MO:** Well, I almost lost my child to opiates. I was using a lot of percocets and oxycodones. I was using heroin. I was using everything under the sun to deal with the trauma that was just my past. To deal with my past.

**SP:** Is this before the surgery or...?

**MO:** This was after the surgery. And then, when anyways fast forward a little bit. I started getting involved in my culture. An elderly lady, a medicine woman. She came to me and she told me that I didn't need to be like that anymore. That I had a choice. And, I was just in the building just because I, she was an advocate that was working with families, and I was just there because I had to deal with child protection over the opiate use. And she saw me sitting there crying and begging them to not take my children away (it's still recording I think...indeterminate noise) and she told me I didn't have to be like that no more. I didn't have to do this anymore. And I didn't, you know, I asked her well then what am I supposed to do? How do I deal with all of it. How do I deal with me? How do I deal with my past? How do I deal with the pain? And then, she started inviting me to different ceremonies. they started bringing me around to all these women's ceremonies. And the more I told my story the more healing I had. And to have other women tell me that they've been sexually abused, they've went through the same things I went through, and they are strong for it. I wanted to be strong for it. I didn't wanna be, I don't wanna say weak, I just don't wanna be lost in my pain anymore. They helped me find a different way. It was through those ceremonies I was able to become my own woman instead of hiding it. I was so afraid of who I was that I didn't know my purpose. They helped me find it. Ever since then I just continue to do, I do work for the community. I work on behalf of many different organizations to be able to address opiate abuse.

**SP:** How did you get involved, like in the work? It just came as an outgrowth of the wisdom of the women that you were hanging out with? Like what brought you to the actual work?

**MO:** It was the, there was a lot of my friends that were dying. I lost a lot of my childhood friends that I grew up with. I lost family members. I lost my closest cousin. She was using when I started doing this work. And, no matter what I did I couldn't get her to stop, and I tried everything. There was nothing. There was no programs available at the time to get her help. So, I lost her. She died. And, when she died I just continued to keep not only talking to the addicts that are still out there that are struggling. But I started trying to find more resources. And there was hardly any. So I wanted to help build them. So I started talking with other organizations, other directors, to start creating these programs. Uhm, I started meeting with tribes to start creating these programs. that we were losing people on a massive level. We had a death in our community every two days. Uhm, and in which, in the native community, we're such a small number that when we lose someone, it hits home because we're all pretty much related. And, we all know each other since, we were you know born.

**SP:**Are you talking about specifically about Little Earth?

**MO:** Mhm.

**SP:** Every two days?

**MO:** Every two days we lost another person to opiates. ANd during that time is when I really worked my tail off to get us narcan and at that time there was no narcan available for the community.

**SP:** How long ago was that. If you can just give me a timeframe?

**MO:** 2015... they didn't' have narcan available. In 2016 was when we finally fought, we had a good enough fight to make narcan available to the community. `

**SP:** Is we... is that natives against heroin?

**MO:** No, no. That was just me and the Little Earth Residents.

**SP:** Oh.... I'd like to hear more about that!! [laughs]

**MO:** [laughs as well] Yeah so we, I helped organize a lot of our residents. So we had meetings. We had sit downs where we were talking about this issue. Like, we're losing people left and right. Everyone is hooked on opiates. Everyone is. And we're trying to figure out, what are we gonna do? There was even people in there that were still `using and they're trying to figure out like, how do we save not only myself but save our, you know... my cousin that's also using to. So, we had these meetings and from those meetings our numbers got bigger and we started fighting for different... something to save people when they are ODing. At the time there... we didn't even know that there was something called naloxone. It wasn't until a paramedic, uhm during one of our overdoses that we got a call about that the paramedic that the paramedic used a drug called naloxone to reverse the overdose. That's when, that's just when, that just struck a light. Like, we need that. We need that here and we need that for everyone. We started meeting with our state representative. I started bringing in our state reps, I started bringing in our city council, I started bringing in all of these other political people that I knew. that I knew. that i was working with on these issues. But, you know, just trying to brainstorm. But I started actually giving them this is what we need. this is what I need you to do. And once it became available we just started training every resident. Every resident had to go through naloxone training. Every resident had to have narcan in their home. And, we made sure that we went through every house and trained everyone. Our overdoses had dropped. Our deaths had dropped. And we were just happy enough to have our loved ones. We didn't even think about social programming. I didn't think about social programming until a year later. And a year later was when I created and helped create Natives Against Heroin.

**SP:** Ah, so it started at Little Earth?

**MO:** Yes.

**SP:** And, tell me a little bit about that. And I also would ask the question: You know, I'm from Minnesota but haven't really been a while for awhile. What about Steve's Law and Rummler? Were they helpful?

**MO:** Yeah they actually helped a lot when it came to advocating at the state for the naloxone to be available for the community. So the state was going to pass a bill to, there was Karen Clark I was working with, and she said that there's a bill in place but it wasn't from her, it was from another lady. She said, there's a bill in place to make naloxone available to the community. And I was like really? And she was like yes but I need you to go meet with her. And I need you to have Little Earth residents come meet with the other state reps. And that's when I met Steve's Rummler. They were already there advocating for it. So I was just able to piggy back. It was like a dream come true. It was easier enough for me to just bring Little Earth residents just to come testify. And it was like it was handed out. It was meant to be. So we just worked with Steve's Rummler, and they helped us get the nalaxone. It was easy, it was much of a blessing, when the health department was able to do that for us.

**SP:** And so then there was the creation of Natives Against Heroine?

**MO:** Yes,

**SP:** How did that come about?

**MO:** Well, we, what we realized was no matter how many, you know naloxone kits we handed out, no matter how many people knew how to use them, we were still losing people. We still lose people today. And it's just, we needed to have a support system. Somewhere where addicts like myself and others would feel comfortable about telling their story, feel comfortable to be involved, to become their own advocates on this issue. So that way they feel empowered to not only, not only speak about the issue, but help their friends, their family members, in becoming sober. So we created Natives Against Heroin as a healing circle. At first it was just a healing circle, where we would just sit around and talk. And it was just a support group. And then, after much of the issues started rising with the drugs. When they started stripping the doctors form giving the opiates away, you know so easily. When that happened the drug dealers became a big thing. No longer were you able to go to your doctor as your drug dealer. You now had to go through the gangs. And the gangs were having wars in Little Earth. They were actually having big wars where they were shooting people left and right. We weren't dying anymore of opiates, we were dying from guns. So then, that's when we started Natives Against Heroin to start doing patrols. So our addicts, the ones that were in recovery, started actually patrolling Little Earth. Then we started walking around, talking to all the gangs and the drug dealers. And telling them, we have children here. We've already had children shot multiple times. We don't need no more, our children cannot be going through this, not our kids. We had multiple children that were shot and brought to the emergency room because of the drug war in our community. So we did, we started that patrol. From there became the marches. We started doing marches to shut down drug dealers. So, we started going up to drug dealer's houses that we knew. That we were tired of talking to, to tell them to quit.

**SP:** And they were living at Little Earth?

**MO:** They're living at Little Earth, they're drug dealers in different res's that we went to. We went to the reservations too because drugs were being transported not only from Little Earth but from the res's to Little Earth, from Little Earth to the res's. So we were going all over through the state of Minnesota. Shutting down drug dealers. So we would go to the drug dealer's house and we would all stand out there and we would all tell them, like a big group of us, sometimes there were thousands of us out there, telling them— "You need to quit dealing drugs in our community."

**SP:** Wow that is a bold move. How did that go?

**MO:** It went well, it went well!

**SP:** I mean, like, can you give an example of your first march up to a house?

**MO:** Our very first one we had over seven thousand people. We marched all the way from Red Lake. All the way to different drug houses in Red Lake. It was, at first it was just an awareness march. Then the people wanted to address the drug dealers. Because they wanted to address the drug dealers, we just said let's go for it. And we winged it the first one. And when we did that drug dealer's house, at first he didn't quit. He fought. He was arguing with us, yelling at us, telling us to stop. "You guys are shaming us." All this stuff. And then, six months later he becomes one of our members. He quits dealing and he becomes one of our members. And then that's when we knew. We're gonna keep doing this. When we started, when we started going from different res's and different res's we were able to change drug dealers from dealing for their—'cuz a lot of them are dealing just for their use, 'cuz they're users—and we understand that. So once they become a part of our membership, then they create their own, instead of doing it on a drug base, you create your own chapter. And you have your own addicts and everyone that you used to deal with, deal to, have 'em come in, and you become their support to become sober.

**SP:** So, through that are people like getting access to treatment?

**MO:** Mhm. Yeah everyone has contacts for treatment facilities. People go to treatment. Some people will just go through ceremony and just do ceremony to get clean. Some people will just use the sweat lodge. We have a few members that I know. They were active users and on just, they were just using Percocets, but they used the sweat lodge to become clean.

**SP:** So, is it safe to say that NAH supports harm reductive efforts?

**MO:** Oh, of course. We do that a lot. We even have members in our group that are still active users, but since they're active users we still, they still need support, they still need a family, they still need help, and we're still there for them. And it's, it doesn't, we don't shame them. We know that they're using. It's okay. It's more so when you're ready. And, and when we help with that, like when you're ready, you can do more. But it's up to them when they're ready to do more.

**SP:** Wow**.** So, you're a community organizer?

**MO:** Yes.

**SP:** And, prompted by opioids? And trauma?

**MO:** Yes, yes.

**SP:** And, so you start organizing at Little Earth. Natives Against Heroin grows.

**MO:** Yeah.

**SP:** And then, tell me more about your organizing from that—NAH— to you know running to be a state representative? How did that happen? [laughs]

**MO:** Well, so with NAH., because we were going through all different towns and reservations and the state, We startedm well I started getting to know the state representatives. Started getting to know a lot of politicians, because I knew that there was bills that needed to be passed so that we could address more of the harm reduction side of this.

**SP:** So, were you educating?

**MO:** I was educating quote “politicians” on the issue [Sue laughs]. That was my job, was to educate them on what they didn't know. So, what brought me into running was more so that my state representative was retiring. The one that was helping me through all of this.

**SP:** Karen Clark?

**MO:** Yeah. The one that was helping me through all of it was retiring and I had, I didn't know what to do. At the time I was like, I freaked out. I was scared 'cuz I was... all the work that we've done, all the work that we still need to do, still needs to happen in the House. And when she said she was retiring I just, I knew somebody had to take that mantle. I knew somebody had to step up and do something. So that way our harm reduction services actually go through so that pharmaceutical companies actually have to pay for what they're causing. So I decided to run. And then, when I decided to run I didn't realize that I would become bare naked. That my story would come out. And I would have to, I would say I would have to deal with the trauma in a more public eye.... again. Like usually when you deal with trauma, you can deal with it in a private setting. You know, where you're just with you and your therapist, or you and your healers and stuff. It's more private. But when you're running in public view, your traumas come out for everyone to see. And they wanna use those traumas to help push your agenda, right? But what they don't understand is that it's a bare naked feeling. You revealed everything about yourself to the world. And I wasn't ready for that. That was the hard part. I wasn't ready for that. I didn't know that that's what I was signing up for at the time. That I was, I really thought that I could run and not have to tell my story and not have to tell people that I was a user, that I was sexually abused, that I was you know beaten as a child, that I was homeless for four years... you know? I didn't know that I had to tell everybody that. And, when I was running it all had to come out.

**SP:** What was that like for you? And how did you deal with it?

**MO:** It was extremely hard to deal with [laughs]. It was very... painful? Because it was a public pain. And it... how I dealt with it was mostly... I tried to remember that all of who I am, those traumas *are* me. They made me who I am. And I, I needed to use that. I've been using it all this time to help my community. I've been using all my traumas all this time to make a different life for everyone in my community. And I just needed to remember that and continue to remember that whenever people would you know, at the doors some people would, you know like say: "You don't have no business running." You know, "You have no business running. You're just ...all you are, you're just full of all this trauma. That's all you are. You're just one trauma" [laughs]. But, the thing was, the thing was, I had to fight against that stigma.

**SP:** So it must have been very public. I mean, I can only imagine to the degree that I have been you know, publicly involved working in community, but never in a political sense. And having to share information, and then you get people's response. I mean like, it must have been, I can't imagine. I mean like... like...

**MO:** People thought, there were some people that thought that I was running just for people to feel sorry for me or something.

**SP:** And they would say things like that?

**MO:** Mhm, mhm. Yeah. And it was more so, it was more so like, me trying to prove myself to people. That I'm different. I'm not my past. I'm not my traumas. My traumas don't define me. They help push me, but they don't define me. I had to prove that to people time and time again. And it was because of all the interviews. So I was the first Little Earth resident to ever run for public office. We've never had a Little Earth resident that ever ran. So, for me to be the first I had a lot of interviews. A lot of interviews from different you know radio stations, to reporters, to newspapers. And it was being the "first," that's where my story had gotten out, of who I am. And that's how everybody found out. And that's how everybody saw me. So that's, that's where it all began with the trauma part. And then, that was the hardest part of my campaign.

**SP:** Was that the beginning of the campaign or throughout the whole campaign?

**MO:** It was more so in the middle of the campaign, towards the middle. In the beginning I kept it really hush. I kept my past out of it. It was my campaign team that wanted to have me talk about my issues with a reporter. Talk about my past traumas with a reporter. And it was my campaign team that thought it would be best because that's what made me stand out from all of the other candidates. There were seven candidates running in my race. So, to make me stand out, what made me different from all of them was my life, my life story. That I was the only one, out of all of seven of us, that has lived this life. And that has actually used those traumas to address the issues. So, that's what they wanted to use. And that's what made it come up in public. I just didn't realize how hard it was gonna be afterwards. For me anyway, just for me. It wasn't, it wasn't hard for everybody else, it was more so hard for me [laughs].

**SP:** Well I would imagine it was just hard for you! [Ortega laughing] And so the campaign is recently over. What about two months maybe? Not even that?

**MO:** Yep, yep. It's recently over.

**SP:** And so, how did the campaign turn out for you?

**MO:** Well, I got... no matter what my team is like "We won!" Even though we didn't win. I had the least amount of money out of any campaign, out of all seven. I only had ten thousand dollars throughout my whole campaign. Ten thousand dollars. But I got, I got the most votes on election day. I won primary day, I lost early vote.

**SP:** Wow. Right on.

**MO:** Yeah, and they were all running with around 90 to 100 thousand dollars—their campaigns were.

**SP:** How did you go about fundraising?

**MO:** I didn't wanna. I fundraised right off of the doors. So when I would talk to people at the doors, they would give me money right at the door. I would ask them if they would vote for me, if they would support me. And then they said yes, and then I would ask them, "Well would you be able to you know contribute to my campaign. You know for regular costs of printing and everything." And that was it. And that's how I raised ten thousand was just off from the doors, off from neighbors. That's what I wanted. I wanted to make sure my campaign was fully ran by the community. So, I did it. I made sure that the money that we got was only from the community. Which I guess was my downfall. I should've accepted money from PACs and everybody else, but I wanted to make a statement.

**SP:** It sounds like you did.

**MO:** Yeah.

**SP:** And so, now that the campaign is over, what are you doing now? The two part question...and then, would you run for office again? [Both proceed to laugh].

**MO:** Right now... I'm gonna go back to school. I still have a lot of contracts that I have to fulfill. So, and I still have Natives Against Heroin that I'm turning into an org. So, there's still a lot of work that I'm doing. And then, I'm just gonna go back to school for a while. Finish up my degree. And I don't think I'll run again. I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. I know I'm, this coming next few months, I'm training other Little Earth residents to run.

**SP:** Fantastic.

**MO:** So, I got a grant to train other Little Earth residents to sit on neighborhood boards, to sit on commissions, and to also run for public office.

**SP:** That is fantastic.

**MO:** I'm a power builder. I like to make sure I help lift people up.

**SP:** And, what about school? Get a degree in what?

**MO:** Law enforcement is my degree.

**SP:** Really? So, can you talk a little bit about that. Why did you decide law enforcement? [Ortega laughing]. I just didn't expect that!

**MO:** A lot of people don't. [Both laughing]. A lot of people don't! I wanted to change the criminal justice system. So I started my degree back in, 2013? I went to college. I started it out but I never finished. I dropped out of college so that way I could you know raise my daughter. She was going through a lot of health problems at the time. So I stopped school to take care of her. And then, from there I went on working and then started on doing all of this community organizing stuff, so that just became a farther priority. But my degree, my major, has always been law enforcement. Only because of the police brutality that was happening in my community, and to a lot of my family members. I wanted to change the criminal justice system from the inside. So I thought I would become a cop to do that. So I will go finish my law enforcement degree. Then go to the U of M for criminal justice.

**SP:** Right on. And so, do you think, like at some point working within the criminal justice system somehow other that a cop? Or do you think it's really, or do you wanna be a "peace officer"? I think that's what they're often...

**MO:** Mhm.No, I don't wanna be a peace officer. I will do something different within the field. I'm, at first I wanted to be a "peace officer" and then reach detective. But then I was like, that's just... I wanna be there *before* the problems occur. I wanna be able to address it before everything gets to the point of, you know... I don't wanna be there afterwards. After all is said and done, and everyone is already hurt and families are already destroyed. I wanna be there to help fix families. I wanna be there to help address the traumas that our criminal justice system does to our families. 'Cuz there's, not matter what, I get it people make mistakes. We're human beings. But I also understand that, we also have other human beings that are connected to us. If we throw someone in prison, when we throw them in prison like that, their children suffer, their families suffer. They are in prison just as much as their family member is in prison. And we need to be addressing, how is it that we keep... how do we minimize the trauma for the families that are going through this system? We do understand that he or she has a price to pay. We understand that. But we have to minimize the trauma. How can they still parent? We have to allow them to still be a parent. We have to allow them to still... if it's us providing rides for their kids to go here, to see their parents on a weekly basis. If it's doing live Skypes so they can see their kid's dance recital. You know, like, if something we have to do *something* to minimize and allow them to still be parents while they're incarcerated.

**SP:** I would agree with you a hundred percent.

**MO:** 'Cuz they should be able, we could do Skype videos, you know? Like have some [laughs] "It's my kid's first soccer game." "Well guess what? You're gonna sit here and watch your kid's soccer game. Like you're still in prison but, here's your kid's soccer game." You know? You can still be a part of that, in some type of way. We need to be providing something to help minimize this, because we're just, we're creating a generational trauma that is continuing to play out with a lot of our communities.

**SP:** Are you a leader in the broader Native community in Minnesota?

**MO:** Yes.

**SP:** Well that's fantastic.

**MO:** Yes. It's not just the Native community. Ever since my campaign it's all over Minneapolis. I wouldn't call myself a leader, I'm more so just an advocate. I just like to help people. It fills my soul. It's one of those things where you say like, if you don't like a job you're not gonna stay there very long, but this is one thing where helping people, it fulfills me. Where I go home, and I feel like I've done good. I've done what I needed to do for the day. And then I can wake up the next day and do it again, and feel good about it. I've had plenty of jobs where... I worked in a homeless shelter. It was the hardest job I had. I told myself I'll never do it again. I worked in a youth homeless shelter for Native kids. And, the shelter would take children—it would be child protection—would take children away from their parents. And they would put them into this, our shelter. And, having to see them, their little faces crying for their parents. All they want is love. And you can see it, and you can feel it. That's all they're yearning for, is their parents' love. I couldn't be a part of that. I couldn't be a part of holding them from their families. All I wanted was for them to have their parents. And when I had to see that, and deal with it every day, I told myself I needed to do something different. I can't be a part of this. I can't hurt these babies. They didn't deserve it. They didn't do nothing wrong for them to have to be sitting in a shelter, wondering what's gonna happen to them. They shouldn't be worried about what's happening to them. So that's, it just reminded me of boarding schools all over again.

**SP:** I can understand why. I suspect that many people see you as a leader despite your protest that you're just an advocate [both laugh]. And especially for women, and for Native women. You know, I think that for me, I think a lot about, well certainly harm reduction is something I believe in. I've worked in for over twenty years. But my focus, and my emphasis has always been around women. Not to exclude men, but women, women identified, and trying to create positive change for the lives of women, and that are pregnant and parenting, and no access to resources, and desperate. So, I'm wondering...

**MO:** Women that are incarcerated have harsher sentences than men.

**SP:** Yes.

**MO:** They get longer sentences. And it's, it pissed me off when I was in college. I argued with a lot of my instructors in college. I know I'm going back to go argue again [both laugh]. Because it was, it's discriminatory. It's discrimination. And we have a protective class against discrimination against sex. But yet, our criminal justice system can blatantly and openly discriminate over and over and over again. And no judge, no one, gets held accountable. Especially when these women have children, or they're giving birth in prison. A lot of children die from giving birth, from their mothers giving birth in prison. The babies, some of 'em don't even survive. And it's only because of the kind of treatment they get when they're giving birth. They're cuffed to a bed. How would you like it to give birth, being cuffed to a bed? That's...

**SP:** I can't even imagine.

**MO:** Right? It's just... oh my god... like, the things that I've read. I tend to take up the harsh topics in everything I do. Even in college I did it. I don't know why it is about me. I take up the topics that nobody wants to talk about. And I tend to write about 'em, and research 'em, and do what I can to figure out well how can we change it? And my instructors were always, me and my instructors were always at each other's necks [laughs]. And it was only because I was always wanting to change a system. Like this can't be happening. Like look at these numbers. And, my instructors are always, you know like... well we'll find out how they feel when they see me come back [laughs].

**SP:** Well it sounds to me like it's fantastic. Like you are really there to learn. And to create positive change for yourself and for other people. And it sounds like you educate your instructors.

**MO:** Yeah.

**SP:** I don't know, in my experience, you know when I would do some education in schools around harm reduction like in the '90s, nobody had ever really heard of it. And, it's Minnesota so abstinence is expected. So it was a hard conversation to have, and it was like spending a lot of time explaining to people what harm reduction was. And it was more related to HIV and Hep-C, rather than overdose. So I'm curious now, like, harm reduction seems to be fairly common-place throughout the country, and in Minnesota! What is your experience like? You know like in school, or other community places? Do people know and support harm reduction? Do you spend a lot of time explaining to them why it matters? Or what's that like?

**MO:** What I've noticed, harm reduction is much more accepted in the communities of color. In communities of color, it's way more accepted, more looked at like yes we need this. But when you look at the counterparts, like white society for instance. They still believe in abstinence. That's where the hardest part is. The older white folks. It's harder to explain to them. There are still some, you know cuz I, throughout my door knocking when people would ask me about my background in opiates and all of this. It was more so the older white men, that would have the hardest time to accept harm reduction. That I was giving people a way to just continue to use and use and use and use... and to keep the drug stuff going and going. No matter what we do, the drugs will always be there. And that is not because of communities of color. That is because of our country. Our country is allowing the drugs to be there. They are allowing that to be shipped in. It's just communities of color, because they deal with a lot of trauma, they deal with a lot of poverty, and poverty creates trauma, that's why drugs are so susceptible in the communities of color. It is *not* their fault, why it's here. So, the more I tried to explain that to an older white man, for instance... I think it's because I'm a woman of color. That gives them sometimes the feeling of "I don't need to listen to you," or "You're not talking." You know? Being a woman, like you said, you automatically lose some type of respect from some male counterparts. There are a lot of males out there that will automatically lose respect for you just because you're a woman. Being a woman of color you even lose more. So, in this state it's a lot more simpler and easier 'cuz if you go out to like Georgia for instance.... Georgia is *so* far away from harm reduction. They're still in the criminalization stage where they just wanna criminalize every.... but, I get it, they have a lot of overdoses and stuff going on over there too. But it's, it's gonna take them a while to learn that harm reduction actually helps reduce overdoses. Harm reduction actually helps promote more sobriety, but that takes time to show them that. Because harm reduction is so big in Minnesota, we are the lab rats. We are the ones that will do the data, we'll be the ones to collect all this data, and then we'll start seeing the trickle effects in other states. But we have to be the first. So, right now we will make all the mistakes. But, it's okay to make mistakes, 'cuz we can learn from them. And, we're just fortunate that we have a lot of people in our state that believe in the same thing. That want to be the first to try this. So it will take some time. We'll see it throughout the country, but it'll take time. Am I making sense?

**SP:** You are absolutely making sense. I was just thinking about where I wanted to go with that. I think that, you are such a strong, I'm sorry I'm gonna use the word leader. And not because... I can see that in you. Your willingness to stand up. Your willingness to be heard. Your bravery and your courage just shine through. And, I'm wondering, like just really I guess in many ways excited to see where you will go next [Ortega laughs]. You don't strike me as a person that is necessarily content [Ortega laughs]. You've just got to keep moving and keep building with what you're doing, and your passion comes through. If I could be so bold, it's like it's grown out of your own experience.

**MO:** Yes, it has.

**SP:** And that, you share that. And that, you know your face, and how you radiate...like you're infectious [Both laugh].

**MO:** Well, thank you! [Both laugh].

**SP:** I would imagine that, really for younger women, for young girls, for your daughters... two of them right?

**MO:** Mhm.

**SP:** That you are a very strong role model.

**MO:** Yeah. I started out mentoring kids, you know?

**SP:** Did you?

**MO:** Mhm. My very first job was a youth mentor.

**SP:** And were they youth using drugs?

**MO:** Mhm.

**SP:** How was that? [Ortega laughs]. I mean like, did they expect, I mean like what was the relationship like? I think oftentimes like youth expect, you know adults to be finger wagging. And, telling them that they shouldn't be using drugs. I mean like, what was that conversation like when you were a mentor of youth, based on your own experience?

**MO:** I was honest. I was very honest with them. That's really where, that's where the trust came in. That's where I was able to build trust. The more honest you are with people, the more trusting a person can be. And then, once a person trusts you the more impact you can make on them. Especially when it comes to kids and teens. I was honest with them! Like yeah, I used. I used and you guys are using. But guess what? We can do something different. I can do it with you. The more I showed them, and gave them a part of me, the more they gave me them. So, I was able to change a lot of—I call them my kids cuz I'll always look at them as my kids—I was able to change their lives. There's a lot of my kids that already graduated college. A lot of my kids that are already you know, I have one kid that's already almost a lawyer! She's got one more, like session, or like class bar she was saying. One more test, and she'll be able to be a lawyer. I still keep in contact with a lot of my kids. And they still, wherever they see me they still get super excited to see me. And it's like, they're always so happy to tell me how well they're doing. And how much I've helped them. And it's more so listening and being a part of their story, just as much as they're a part of mine.

**SP:** That's really powerful isn't it?

**MO:** Yeah.

**SP:** Growing experience.

**MO:** That's one thing that I try to explain to people a lot. Life experience means way more than a textbook experience. I'm gonna go back to school and go get my degree and everything, and show everybody like, yes I can do your textbooks. That's totally fine. I'll do your textbooks. But one thing they can't do, is live the life that I lived. One thing they can't do is experience what I've experienced. Or done, what I've done. 'Cuz there is a lot of lives that I've impacted. A lot of lives that I've helped change. And, I am humbled by how much people have trusted me into their lives. And, I am able to help them have a better life. Give them hope. Cuz there's a lot of addicts out here that don't even have hope. And for me to be able to give them hope for another day, that we can do this another day, and we'll get through it. It means the world to me. It means the world to me to see the light in them come out.

**SP:** Thank you. I think that's a wonderful place to end the interview [Ortega laughs]. I guess I should ask, is there anything else you want to add?

**MO:** Nope! That everything.