We're in Vieques on October 7, 2024, to talk a little about the history of fishing and the history of Vieques. Interviewee's experiences in this field. I understand you're not fishing, but what is your connection with the ocean? Could you tell me a little about that?

I prepare food, and the main dish we work with at our café is fish—fresh fish. My father-in-law was always a fisherman at home, and my husband also fished—not officially with a license, but recreationally. Eventually, we started selling fish for our business. So, we're completely familiar with it. You see, we're on an island; it's impossible not to have a connection with fishing.

So you have a business or restaurant where you sell fish.

And.

What do your husband and father-in-law have sex with?

My father-in-law died a few years ago, but relationships come from family, from family heritage, if you can use that word, but yes, in a certain way, we created this bond. Before having the business, we fished simply to eat fish, and my husband decided to create this—to open a cafe on the beach, and the main dish was obviously going to be seafood. Right now, we have fish suppliers through my son and my husband, who goes fishing with my son, because one of the things we want to do and show people is fresh fish, which hasn't been frozen; it completely changes the texture and flavors. So, it's like what we're promoting is fresh fish. We've been doing this for 25 years now.

Twenty-five years with the restaurant.

And.

And when you started, were there more people selling fresh fish like that or not?

I think the number of people selling fish has always remained the same. What's changed is that fishing is currently taking place. Fishermen are selling fish to many parts of Puerto Rico. And what makes it harder to get fish from the fishmonger or directly from the fishmonger, because these people who come from Naguabo come as far as Aguadilla, although there's fish here, and lobster (Spiny lobster, \*Panulirus argus\*). Well, they sell everything to them. The fishermen sell everything they catch to these people, but it's easier. Of course, it's understood that the fishermen want to get rid of their entire catch, and it's easier to sell it to one person and not have to keep the catch and try to sell it on the same day. So that has changed, a significant increase, to the point that sometimes it's very difficult to get it from the fishmonger during certain seasons, the high tourist season, which starts in December and extends until about April. It's almost impossible to get fresh fish.

[00:04:11]

In her business, her husband and son give her all the fish for her business.

Yes, exactly. He does have a lot because I told him we don't freeze fish; if he has too much fish, or too much for me, for the personal income I'm selling, then he sells it to someone else.

But does that happen a lot?

It happens after April.

During those months they sell a lot because tourists come.

Exactly. From April to July, the amount of fish sold is lower.

And how did you come up with the idea of ​​starting this business? Your husband, he told me.

He worked in restaurants since he was 12 years old.

Here?

In Vieques, yes. He's worked in different places. In my house, we've all been, the majority, almost all of us are women. Since my grandmother, there have been seven women, one man, four women, one man. So, most of us are women and we cook. My grandmother worked as a cook and childcare provider when she was in her 40s, maybe, and almost all the women have cooked, we've cooked. And we're good at cooking. So, he decided there was a possibility of a new rental building, and he asked me if I could cook and he could manage, and so we did, and then we started. Abdiel was still a baby, he was tiny, and we started, even with the kids running around the area. And it took time for people to see the place because it was new and within the resort. And the concept we wanted to bring was conch, the queen conch (Strombus gigas) in different forms: fried, pickled, salad. We wanted to exploit the queen conch (Strombus gigas) because at that time there was queen conch (Strombus gigas) and it wasn't so difficult, now people are almost arriving in San Tomás looking for queen conch (Strombus gigas) so the little- How difficult it was for us to acquire queen conch (Strombus gigas) over the years, well the concept was changing, so it was whatever appeared, if it was lobster, (Spiny lobster, \*Panulirus argus\*) the fish, but we always tried to have some seafood, but the queen conch (Strombus gigas) passed a little; now they call it the gold of Palestine, difficult to obtain.

[00:07:16]

When did it start to get difficult, the hardest part with the queen conch? (\*Strombus gigas\*)

I'd say that by 2014 or 2015, it was already difficult because they had to travel very far from our coast, and the further away they went, the more expensive it was, because it's obviously labor intensive, requires fuel, and requires more time. So it started to become very expensive; when we started, the pound was five or four dollars, and now it's going for 16 or 18 dollars, because it's very difficult to obtain.

Are your husband and son going on the boat together?

They usually have a 17-foot boat, and they fish there, but close by; they don't go very far. And Abdiel dives, practically without a tank, and whatever he catches, as long as it's not poisonous, not dangerous in size, and obviously has a range. And whatever comes in fishing, whatever comes in the business that day, will depend entirely on what they find.

Tell me a little about how you learned. You told me that you learned with your grandmother and your mother, you cooked a lot. Did you cook a lot of fish back then, when you were growing up?

Yes, we always traditionally have fish for Holy Week, when only fish was eaten, but fish was like the special dish, like when they got the fish, everything was chopped into little pieces and everyone ate it, it was like with free hand.

[00:09:15]

Tell me a little about that. Is that still done or not?

There are few families that keep those things, because it was very old.

Tell me a little about how that was done, what did it mean, what did they do?

My grandmother, usually when they brought her the catch, because one of her grandsons also fished, and when she went, she always caught a fish or two for herself. They did sometimes save fish when they didn't have much fish, saving it until there was enough for everyone to eat.

Excuse me, how did you keep it?

Frozen.

Frozen.

My mom, her sister, and her mom lived on my street, and each of us, well, my grandmother had some grandchildren who were living with her, my aunt had two children, my mom had five, so we needed fish. And it was like a Sunday, (Blackline tilefish, \*Caulolatilus cyanops\*) we would fry a lot of fish, some of them would be kept in glass jars with oil, vinegar, onion, bay leaves, pepper, then they would store them there; they would fry them, everyone would store them and let them marinate there for a while, and then they would fry arepas, there were a lot of arepas. And it was a table about this size, a really big table and there in the middle with banana leaves, they would put anything on the fish, the arepas, and it was like everyone was eating like that with their hands. And it was a nice family thing, and they did it a lot, but during Holy Week it was like the whole week we were eating fish and fish broth with corn flour, which they called funche, and it's delicious, the head of the fish they caught, very large, they boiled it with a lot of seasoning, and leaves, and then a corn flour, polenta, and then it was a while, and that was breakfast, lunch, that was a delight, it was something that was not common, that did not happen very daily, or weeks would go by before you could enjoy a fish dish, but when you caught one, it was delicious, totally different, it's like Christmas, the pork, they make the suckling pig, well it was the fish, but at least once a month and Holy Week, it was not missed.

And tell me, how do you celebrate Holy Week now?

[00:12:00]

The Good Friday custom of not eating meat is still maintained. Many people—not everyone, but it's much more deeply rooted in the Catholic faith and people by tradition—but it's less than it was 20 years ago, much less. But it's still where most local fish is sold, and those weeks aren't as tourist-friendly. Holy Week is well-targeted for locals, and everyone starts selling it. Fishermen start advertising that they're selling fish for that week, so they make good sales, and the locals eat good fish.

But why do you think this change happened since what you told me, that, Holy Week, the Sundays when the whole family was together and now it happens but less, why do you think that changed?

There's a strong migration, many people leaving the island, very different lifestyles than 20 years ago. People really worked one job and supported their families; now there are people who have three jobs, four jobs, or different types of work, and the quality of time for themselves and their families has changed. The cost of living has increased radically, and salaries aren't commensurate with those increases. We've lost that sense of sitting down at the table and talking about it; we've lost a lot of the young population. And with that, we've also lost the traditions and the things we had as a traditional family, so to speak.

I understand. Tell me a little about how you prepare your food. How did you prepare conch (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*) in the beginning and when you opened your restaurant, and is it something you invented, or is it something you learned from your grandmother, your mother, or adapted from your grandmother, your mother? Tell me a little about that, and then, if you're up for it, how you did it back then, and if you still do it.

[00:14:50]

I think my grandmother had a style; she cooked deliciously, and she cooked a lot on the stove, using wood, so everything tasted super different; the flavor was everything. My mom, who wasn't much of a stove person, just a stovetop person, could do exactly the same thing, but in a different way, and it was delicious, but it wasn't the same as my grandmother's. That's when I came in. I follow the same patterns they had already made, but I modify them a little. For example, my grandmother would leave it in a pot with water, salt, and papaya, papaya leaves. She would throw everything in there, let it boil for hours. It could be three or four hours, and she would add water if it dried out. My mom used that same technique with a spoon inside where she boiled it, and then pressure cookers came along, and that's where I came in. What my grandmother normally made in five hours, my mom would do in two, and I would do in one. English: It was about softening it, because the queen conch (Strombus gigas) is like chewy, very hard; and cleaning it is also a lot, slimy, and you had to always, I jumped, let's do the process. Dry the queen conch (Strombus gigas) and remove the slime, and that slime, they used corn flour, in the case of my mother and my grandmother, they used corn flour, and with that they practically made the queen conch (Strombus gigas) and washed it, then they made some cuts in the darkest parts of the queen conch (Strombus gigas) which is a thick, slimy skin, and then they cut it with a knife, and when it was boiled, the skin fell off and came off easily. After that, it softens, and softening it can take hours because the queen conch (Strombus gigas) is very hard, and after it softens, you go back and wash it, you remove all the dark skin, it stays- There are people who use it completely, we don't even have the eyes, or a muscle they have, they use it like the hoof where it moves, very hard, and it's dark, we always remove that, and the queen conch (Strombus gigas) is left creamy, complete, clean. And then from there, well, you cut it and make the escabeche, which is garlic, onion, pepper, with olives and olive oil, and then that is mixed in there and with that you eat, you make them, if you want it for a cake you stew it, if you want it for a salad, you simply serve it as it is cold, it can be from the refrigerator, and it tastes delicious, and the other way that we try to use it a lot, was fried in breading, breaded, and a conversation with a Korean, who ate it raw, just marinated in lemon juice (Reef shark, \*Carcharhinus obscurus\*) and vinegar, with onion and garlic, he said it had to be there for 28 hours, in all that juice, it tastes really good, but it is very hard and that technique, we used it specifically for the Asian tourists who arrived, they liked it that way, they didn't like the soft one, and for us, the softer the better. And that process took us, between cleaning the slime, softening it and preparing it, hours, because it is laborious, and you buy ten pounds of conch, (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*) but when it is all peeled without anything, it sometimes reduces up to four pounds, it also loses a lot of weight. But nothing, it is very tasty, and it is highly sought after by people, people always like conch, (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*) and since it is so difficult to get also, well, I think the more attracted they are, the more they want it.

[00:19:34]

What were the dishes called back then, how did they sell them? Fried conch (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*), conch-

So without any frills, it was breaded conch, conch ceviche (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*), conch pastelillos (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*), and once we made some conch pastels (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*) and they sold really well, but it was a lot of work. And the stew is also really good, the mofongo was good, but it wasn't as popular as we thought. The dish we wanted was conch, (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*), but it was hard to get, and out of 50 people, only 10 or 12 people ordered it, so the conch (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*) became the second part of the dish.

Do you still sell conch (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*) now?

Yes, yes we get it.

Yes, if they get it, but I suppose not as much, as he told me not that much, more or less.

We can, if we can get it, we can have 80 to 100 pounds a month, which is worked and sells well.

[00:21:00]

Are they the most expensive thing you sell?

Right now yes.

He said to me, When did we make those changes?

In 2014 and 2015, there was a decline; it was harder to get hold of conch (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*). We used to get it right on the beach; we didn't even have to go in that far, it was quite easy, but now it's difficult.

And eating caccrucho is something that comes from the past, is it something that people who live here have always eaten?

Yes. Before, my father-in-law, who was a fisherman, used to say that queen conch (Strombus gigas) and spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) were so easy to get that some people would feed them to pigs. Back in the 1970s, they were pig food. They would sometimes trade lobster and queen conch (Strombus gigas) for beer. And in bad weather, there was so much of it in the sea that you could pick it up from the shore. I never saw that, but those were the stories I heard.

If you tell me a little bit now, after 2000, ten and fourteen, how do you say it?

Fourteen.

Fourteen. After that time, they started adding other things to the restaurant to sell, and what are those things?

It sounds absurd, but people were coming, going to the beach, they wanted hamburgers, they wanted burritos, and the menu kept changing from just seafood, so we started to be the hamburgers. So we said, we're not going to make frozen hamburgers. We bought the ground beef and prepared the meat, we made the bun, trying to make it like a hamburger, not a hamburger; and we cut the potatoes there on the spot, and that was the fries. It changed a little bit to a more Americanized menu, because that's what people ordered if they were going to the beach. So yes, we have rice and beans, arepas, fish, lobster (Spiny lobster, \*Panulirus argus\*), but we also have quesadillas, burritos, (Brown chromis, \*Chromis multilineata\*), the hamburger, but we make everything there, we prepare everything. We try not to use anything prepared; everything is made there—the refrito, the pico de gallo, the bread, the meat—so we don't lose the identity we want to convey to visitors and those who eat our food.

[00:24:10]

And are the clients locals and tourists, or mostly tourists?

We have, I would say, half and half.

Half and half.

The only thing we Caribbean people say, in those seasons, around December, is that the water is too cold, and the locals don't visit the beach as much as the tourists who come fleeing the cold from the north, and they find that, well, we think 89 degrees is cold, so those who come from temperatures of 15 degrees, you're crazy, and we don't use the beach as such, and it's more used and visited by tourists. So during those seasons it increases; consumers are tourists more than locals just for that crazy reason.

A season with clients.

And.

But they also still prepare fish, but not so much conch, (Queen conch, \*Strombus gigas\*) What do they prepare now?

The thing we work with the most is the spiny lobster. (Spiny lobster, \*Panulirus argus\*) The fisherman brings us more spiny lobster (Panulirus argus\*) than sometimes the fish itself, and to keep the cost down, what we always do, two- or three-pound lobsters, is we divide them in half and sell the halves so that it's less expensive, a more economical price so to speak, and it also has more sales. Spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) is like the super, and the coolest dish we have is the spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) stuffed with queen conch (Strombus gigas) so the spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) is used, the head of the spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) is put in, the portion of queen conch (Strombus gigas) is served there so it's like the super dish.

I'm going to get hungry.

Rico.

If you tell me a little bit, are there other women who are involved in the fishmonger business in some way or not so much?

[00:26:39]

At least for us, my niece works in my business. It's a family business, it always has been. When the kids were older, they were the waiters. Abdiel made juices and other things, he was younger. He stayed on; over the years, he grew and modified his techniques, but he makes the best margaritas. He doesn't drink alcohol, but he makes the best margaritas. The other one served as the waiter, and we over there, the girl who works with me, a childhood friend, and my niece, we discuss the fish, identifying the fish, cleaning it, cutting it so the bones aren't a problem, filleting it, that's the most we can say that the business is about the fish, preparing it, the preparation and the—and obviously not just identifying the fish (Blue Marlin, \*Makaira nigricans XLII\*) not just letting the customer know what they're going to eat. It's changed a lot. Fish that weren't poisonous 20 years ago are now poisonous for some reason; the size of the fish sometimes also determines whether it's dangerous to sell or not. For example, I don't sell male hogfish (Lachnolaimus maximus XXXIV) that weigh more than two pounds, because here the belief is that the larger it is and if it's male, it's poisonous. So ciguatera is something that people here normally talk about, and many locals who are walking by, strangely, and ask, "I have ciguatera," that I ate a fish and they're all poisoned. So if somehow the type of fish, we work in the business identifying it, weighing them and all that, taking everything into account so that there isn't a— We don't have an outbreak, or something like that, of poisoning in the business, which until now we haven't had.

I'm interested in this story about some fish being poisoned. Could you tell me a little more? From what I understand, you know because you've seen people experiment with it, and you think it's because of the fish.

And.

But is it something new?

No.

Or relatively new, it was always like that, that type of fish-

[00:29:27]

It's that, and a fisherman can talk about this more, I know this and I handle it in the kitchen obviously, in the preparation of this, but a few years ago, the thing about poisons is always due to the size, here the bigger the fish, the greater the risk of certain fish being poisonous, for example, the picúa, the barracuda, are my favorites, they are very tasty, but then the barracuda have a- There are people who if they catch a five-foot one they say no, that's poisonous, but in my house, my dad would take them because he ate them all, he loved it, so they would bring him those picúa that nobody bought because it would poison him, which what it does is that it can cause vomiting, diarrhea and pain in all the joints, which is what they call ciguatera, and people are unable to even walk. So my dad would eat them, and we would wait for him to eat them, if he didn't have any reaction, then we all ate. That was ours- But I prepared it, my mom prepared it in escabeche, which was the glass jar with oil, and there were the wheels of the barracuda, the picúa. And there are picúas that are one pound, two pounds, that one can eat calmly, because it doesn't poison you. There is another fish that looks a lot like the sama, (Mutton snapper, \*Lutjanus analis\*) I forget the name, but it has fangs, very similar to the sama, (Mutton snapper, \*Lutjanus analis\*) and if they cut its teeth you say, you think it's a sin sama. (Mutton snapper, \*Lutjanus analis\*) That fish of a size three, four pounds, is already starting to become possibly dangerous, we can't sell that type of fish, we don't sell it, at least, we don't fish it. And there's another one that's a jack[ph], they call it jack, and it has several characteristics, one of a spot, of one color, of another color, like that, I don't know which one it is, but, there are some that are poisonous and others that aren't, and in the same way in Florida, there are some fish that also move here, there they are not poisonous but here they are, without any scientific data, well I dare say that we also have our waters full of toxins, of bombs, of sunken ships with pounds, hundreds of pounds, of things that we don't know what was in there, that may, that turns into the corals of our fish, and so, yes, it may be changing something in the metabolism of the fish, it could be that, I don't know. But yes, there are fish that eat them in Florida and that's the same as here, it poisons us but not them. And we're always mindful of the size, weight, and certain characteristics, such as the area. I can't remember the name right now, but like the sama (mutton snapper, \*Lutjanus analis\*), it needs to be the right weight, and the picúa, and sometimes the sierra itself, which is one of the fish sold a lot industrially; a certain weight and a certain mark on the sierra make it potentially poisonous.

[00:33:32]

You must have quite a bit of knowledge of all this, and did you learn this over time or through time and experience?

Experience.

Experience.

In the part, for example, my father was poisoned twice, with a fish, (Blue Marlin, \*Makaira nigricans XLII\*) that as soon as we saw it, we already knew we couldn't eat it, we didn't even try. They had a technique that, when they cleaned the fish, they left it outside, almost all the houses here, the fish are prepared on a table outside, and you clean the fish, you leave the gut, and if the flies don't stick to it it's poisonous, if the flies stick to it and stay there, you can eat it.

Interesting.

And that was a technique he used a lot specifically for the picúas. I know for a fact, it worked with the picúa.

He learned from experience. Well, I wanted to ask you to describe a typical workday in your life, from morning until the end, or from the moment you start work.

Well, my normal work days are going to be closed these days, but most of the year it starts at 5:30, 6:00 in the morning. We have a small garden, so we tend to it.

I don't know what orchard means.

Garden.

Of.

[00:35:22]

We have fruits, plantains, bananas, papaya, pacha, leaves that are eaten, spinach, scallions, little things, the fruits. We spend about half an hour watering everything, taking care of the dogs; I recently had five dogs, now I only have two. And it's the process of taking care of the dogs, feeding them when we get back, and putting them away. Shopping: if it was a Tuesday, if it was a Wednesday, we do the shopping for the vegetables and fruits that we're going to use in the business. Normally, we talk to my son and my husband about whether we're going fishing, they'll go fishing, they go. Sometimes, if they're going fishing, weather permitting, they leave at five in the morning, they go fishing. I do the whole process of leaving the house to then get to the business, making sofritos, things to marinate meat, fish, everything is prepared there, everything is with fresh ingredients, a lot of garlic. Baking, making bread. I try to make bread for at least three or four days. All the preparation is, make a really big pot of beans, another of rice. I normally make nine pounds of rice, five, more or less five or six pounds of beans. I chop a lot of vegetables, a refrigerator just for vegetables, so that takes me easily an hour and a half. With all this, I have help from my two nieces. Juices, mixes that we make for drinks, juices for drinks, for smoothies. Sort all the leaves, discard what's bad, almost to throw away. And we open the door. And I make a lot of arepa dough, I prepare the dough. I have a machine, about this big that helps me, and I make the arepas, and they are made into balls and they are all stored on a tray, it's just a matter of cooking them at the moment, everything is made at the moment, except for the rice and beans, but everything, seafood. I prepare the lobsters. I cook them very briefly, since they're fresh, so they're in the water for seven or eight minutes. I take them out, and then they're split open, cleaned, and stored, already weighed. The fish is identified, weighed, and if it's ready, the cuts we make to season it are made. And the same goes for the meats. The meat is prepared, 10, 15 pounds of meat, and then I put them in portions. Likewise, with chicken and shrimp (Crustaceans spp.), all of that is prepared separately and stored there properly seasoned. That's a task that takes me four or five hours with help, but then once we open the doors, it's easier to prepare. I work from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. with the kitchen open, but I really start working at 7:30 to 8 a.m. I close the kitchen at five, but I always stay until nine or ten at night, depending on how the sales day went. I prepare the next day, have things almost ready for the next day. And the equation repeats itself—it's the same routine, the only thing that varies is the number of dishes sold that day. If I sell a little, it's a little less work, and the cleaning process is done every day. We clean with a lot of water, and it takes us two hours.

[00:40:02]

That's a long day. And who's in charge of managing the money, the business side?

My husband, part of the person who charges you, prepares everything, and we have an accountant who handles the accounts. The accountant, in turn, has his or her staff who keeps us up to date with payroll and tax payments, and everything comes out of an accountant's office, which really helps us a lot.

Is this always the case?

We started doing it like three or four years ago, when the whole mess started—we didn't pay taxes before, now we have, I think it's the most expensive tax there is, 11.5%, when the tax thing started, and you have to fill out a form just for that tax, well it took us a lot of time, so we hired an accountant for that.

I understand. You have something you want to tell me, a question. Your son told me that at one point they decided to take him out of school and homeschool him, and he told me to ask you why, I don't know.

The funny thing is that I studied education, I studied to be a teacher, and in the process of a class I had to teach, it was to go to schools and teach as a teacher and be observed by a teacher who evaluated me and the process of the way it is taught, is very automatic, it is as if all 25 children I had thought the same, analyzed the same, spoke the same, and it does not matter if he did not understand, I had to continue because this part had to be covered, well it was not fair to me. It did not convince me, and then my oldest son was very hyper, and he was all the time he was not calm and at school they told me we were going to do a diagnosis because I think he has problems, and he was approximately seven years old or going on eight years old, and they diagnosed him with hyperactivity.

[00:43:00]

ADHD.

He was diagnosed with hyperactivity after two hours of questioning with psychologists, and to me, a normal child, he doesn't sit still. I didn't see anything difficult or problematic, because he didn't sit still, he slept little, and he had a lot of energy, but he was well-behaved, he was very respectful, and he had an amazing memory, he remembered everything and currently he has memories from when he was two years old. I'm left wondering how he still remembers that, but he has a good memory. They told me you have to medicate him, I didn't, giving him Ritalin was the option and they were forcing me to give him Ritalin, and I read information about Ritalin and nothing, there was nothing good except that the teacher would be happy for the child to be quiet and calm for an hour, two hours, as long as the class lasted. I sat down, I talked, well, I sort of tried to look for options, and the only option they gave me was to medicate him, and no, I said no, I can't. I didn't understand that sacrificing health wasn't helpful. It was sacrificing the health of a child who, to my understanding, was healthy and whole, and was being a child. That he was reckless, yes, that he ran around, that, for example, one rainy day, he decided, he saw water and jumped in the puddle to swim. I never said anything to him because, to me, it's normal for you to want to play with water if it's raining; I think the problem was me, because I let him. But I asked him, I sat down with him, I asked him if he saw an option for me to be his teacher with his dad. I designed how we were going to do the classes, and he told me he would think about it, and I told him, well, think about it. When you're ready, let me know. Abdiel, the youngest, said, I'm ready. I didn't want to do it with one and not the other, and the one that worried me was the one they wanted to medicate, so he told me he would think about it and I would ask him every 15 days and I would say, "Have you thought about it?" It's that my friends, I don't want to leave my friends, we continued, but in the process the teachers kept insisting on medicating him, and one day the teacher beat him up, angry, she hit him and because he didn't listen and since she was frustrated because obviously I didn't agree to the medication, and they wanted that, and it was like nothing, it was a moment of going to something and I told him, and he came and told me what happened, he told me that I was ready to homeschool, OK, and we started; I think we started around Christmas. That first semester was November I think, it was right before Thanksgiving, 2007, 2006. We started something like that. They were, like, a little bit missing the social aspect, they were in a music group, in a marching band, they were in judo, they were in baseball, they were in basketball. I had a very busy schedule for them, and in between that process, their dad and grandfather would sit with them and talk to them about fishing, because they'd been fishing since they were very young, and I think they already had a Hawaiian sling at six years old, but they were already fishing at that age. And they would sit with their grandfather, and their grandfather would talk to them a lot about fishing, the places, the currents; so it was a homeschooling that didn't stay with me, but was influenced by their family. Their grandmother taught them conversational English, and they're bilingual because they had that opportunity from a young age. And the fishing stuff, identifying fish by name and depth, well, her grandfather made a huge contribution there, and I think it was at age two that I felt peace, knowing I'm not crazy, because there was no homeschooling on Vieques. I was the first one to get into that mess here, and they were constantly calling me from school, saying it was mistreatment, I don't know, it was 20 things. At age two, they already had a clear idea of ​​what learning means, what development means. And the curriculum I used was Hostosiano with Montessori; I kind of mixed the two a bit. I gave them the things you're going to do with this, and they built what they wanted, what was best for them, or what they really wanted to do. And so I had space for them to develop on an island level, something we do on Vieques, things we have on Vieques, using Vieques' resources: swimming, fishing, knowing the terms of traps, knowing the species of animals and fish. And we stayed there, and when I was about 15, the oldest said, "I want to try school. I think I'm ready." And he stayed for a year, and then a month later he said, "I don't like it, I don't feel like it." And his aunt, who lived in California, said, "Let him stay with me for a year if you want, to see if he tries something else there and likes it." So he left and stayed for three years. Then, when Abdiel turned 15, he said, "Let me stay at school, too, and see." Abdiel stayed for a year, and the next year, he went to California with his aunt. And then he finished there. They both finished high school in California, and Abdiel studied for a year, a year and a half. He belonged to the group, the swim team, and he did very well at it because he was already from here. We're both musicians, they're percussionists, they dance—he'll tell you no, but they dance to music from here, which is Puerto Rican bomba. They play and dance. They developed extremely well, doing things the way they wanted to. Adbiel wanted to get fully involved in fishing; he's currently in school and that's all there is to it. The other one was like, "I want to farm, I want to learn construction." He's currently a lifeguard, but he doesn't have any knowledge in several areas of life, all of which are things we do here, that we have here.

[00:51:54]

Do you think that the education you gave him, the education on the island, the education at home, had something to do at least with Abdiel and with his- What he chose to do in life, school and all that?

Yes, and in fact, later, in 2010, we started. Parents would approach me, wanting me to teach their children, or they wanted to do homeschooling, whatever. At one point, we ended up with 27 children. What we did was, we would group together and create—it was a school, but back then it was a school. We would come here, we would meet, and they would say, "I want to visit El Yunque." So, I would look for information about El Yunque, the map, what they could see, the types of forests, the characteristics of the forests, and they would study that. And when we went to El Yunque, they would go and identify, "This is the forest because of this, because it's abundant, the species of coquitas." So there was someone at El Yunque who was in charge of giving them a tour, but they already knew what they were going to see; it wasn't like a surprise. And we did that with everything, we visited all over Puerto Rico, with stories and experiences from our island, not textbooks that we don't know where they came from. We talked about the stories of each town, historical figures from each town we visited, cultures, even though it's Puerto Rico, every town always has something very different. So we ended up with a lot of children at the level of—There were people from Spain, for example, who came to spend the summer here, and their children were sent to school, and they stayed with us for four months. There were people from the Amazon, there were people from Spain, there were people from different parts of the United States, from Africa, and each of them, each time they arrived, would give an introduction to where they came from to the other classmates, and they were all of different ages. They created a music group and went on performances everywhere, in many places. They created works of art, they had art exhibits with things from here, with artists from here. It was like, I don't know, like excursions on the island. We had a good time, we went camping, we went camping for four days, and each day, there was a different activity, and they fished, they cooked. In the garden, in the yard, everyone planted tomatoes, eggplants, everything. And they cooked, they ate, they learned to eat, it was what they planted. They went home, and they brought the plants and there they took care of the plants. In total, there were about 37 children who came through us, no more, and I still see them now as adults, and we love each other.

[00:55:33]

Did you have that at the same time you had the business or before the business?

At the same time.

At the same time? And how did he do that?

Dying. It was for the—When I finished with the kids, I went to the store, leaving everything done at the store the day before, and my husband and another person would work. I would drop off the kids and go over there to the store, and there were times we used the store as a classroom to do math with pizza, teaching them fractions by cutting cake, pizza, and things like that, and racing horses, racing boats, learning to sail a sailboat, which they had the class on—we did it all there sometimes. But it was difficult, yes. I worked all day, sometimes sleeping three or four hours, but I liked what I was doing, and they were happy and learning, and I knew it wouldn't be for long either; I didn't see myself doing that long term. It was a difficult time, with a lot of work, but the goal was for the children and my children to have the experience of learning in a different way.

[00:57:09]

Were your children in [INAUDIBLE] during this time?

They were with me until they were both 15, but I continued with the other kids at school while they were gone.

I was alone. It's another thing your son told me to talk to you about, and then I'll leave you. But what I wanted to know was about Hurricane Maria, another disaster. He told me, he told me about the incident that made him come back because he didn't know anything about you. And well, if you could tell me a little about what happened with the business, with you, what was happening in the community, how you got through this episode, which sounds very difficult.

María, it was 2017. I spoke to them, I think it was about 10 minutes before the services went out. I spoke to her and said, "Look, this is tough. Here we have a very fragile system, not to say filthy, with levels, antennas, electrical wiring, all of that is going to go down. Don't worry, we'll be fine, but I don't think we'll be talking to each other anytime soon." Four months went by. They were four crazy months. I lost my business, it went down, I lost everything, stoves, refrigerators all at once. Half of my house went down, which was made of wood, but the other half was fine. We had a roof and a separate kitchen. We were fine in that part. We spent a month practically clearing a path to get out, to get anywhere. Everything was there, the poles, the trees, everything was in the street, and it was really desolate because there was nothing. You looked around and there wasn't a single tree; it was horrible. Obviously, we weren't going to have electricity; we didn't have electricity for a year. Communications arrived in the fourth month, and it was rubbish. It took a minute and then it went down. Many people had nothing, absolutely nothing. There was no water, no food, nothing. The boats didn't leave. In my community, there were many people with cancer. If they want chemo, it's like going back on treatment; we saw people die from it. There was a young man on dialysis, and he couldn't do it anyway; he died. We kept looking, and there were too many people in bad shape, and some friends decided to create a space, a space to help people a little, to get the aid to reach them. And we created, without much planning, a women's group, a soup kitchen, a community garden, and a center where people went, because we coordinated with people from the main island who came and held health clinics, brought medicine. Many people, young people, like Yerai's grandmother, died from the lack of insulin. And it was like things that I understood, that could have been avoided if there had been an emergency plan, if someone had thought of doing something, but the mayor here disappeared, his head sort of disappeared, he wasn't doing anything.

[01:02:16]

What do you mean he disappeared, he ran away from here?

I was out there, doing nothing, absolutely nothing, and we created this space, where a lot of people came and planted. We planted corn, radishes, lettuce, we planted a lot of fast-growing things, because there were no vegetables, there was nothing. And that was done, and then food supplies started arriving, and we started making food for everyone. Everyone arrived, and whoever needed a plate of food and a space where there was hot food. Others were more mobilized on the health side and began to take a census of people who were bedridden, people who were lacking medication, and we got them the medicine and brought it to their homes. And my days started to feel productive because I was on the street and wasn't thinking about all the disaster, and well, I was really busy, distributing food and all that. But it was really good for me. We were out of work for 14 months, which didn't—the power wasn't completely restored for 14 months, but partial power started to come in. And in 14 months, well, power came to the resort, and then we installed the kitchen. An organization donated a refrigerator and a freezer, and with that, my husband fixed the stove. Only the burners worked, but they worked. And with that, we started opening up. We even made food for people who still had nothing. We started from there. My husband, I was over there doing all this hassle. He was putting up roofs for people, plastic sheets, until the aid arrived. We were opening roads, clearing paths, and we were doing that all day long. We were going to get water to bathe and cook and all that, and basically figuring out what to do. I can say that I'm one of the few people who didn't lose their roof, because my house, the cement part remained intact and I was able to, I never lacked a roof, but we lived without water and collecting rainwater to eat, to bathe, to wash clothes, all those things, it was for many months, many, because obviously there was no water, there was no electricity. Since there was no electricity, there was no water because everything works with electric pumps, so, well, we really stayed on the streets, because I think that if I had stayed in my house, I would go crazy, it was horrible. My heart is now in Florida thinking that we here with all our mountains, the winds and the strong construction, what do we do thinking about hurricanes, and to think now that a hurricane like the one that hit us is passing, it's such a flat place, and with weak constructions, they get anxious, I'm like-

[01:06:19]

It reminds him of his experience.

Yes, but María, for everything, I think she changed our lives. Abdiel and Carlos, both of them, decided to return when I was finally able to send them photos from here, and they were like, it didn't feel fair that all of us were here, with this tragedy, and they were over there with air conditioning. And I said, they can stay a while, I don't know, do something, send it over here, but still the mail took months to arrive, everything took too long and nothing. I think there was a bit of helplessness on their part, but I didn't want them to come, because there really was nothing, and that included the little one. In conversations with different fishermen, we tried to fish several times, I had never seen such a large expanse without coral, it was all sand, and very close to the shore, he told me that it was hot and he told me that he saw a tiger shark, 12 feet or more, which was gigantic, and the shark was looking for food, they were eaten, and he said, I gathered everything and left, because never, was there such a need in the sea as there was on land, so even catching fish was difficult at that time, for a long time.

A long time.

And.

He lost his business, and he lost his capacity. Was the ship damaged or not?

The boat didn't. The boat had some damage, minor dents that were quickly repaired, but it survived. I think it filled with water—it filled completely with water—and I think that helped it.

But couldn't he use the boat to go fishing?

We did it.

They did it.

Yes, yes we did.

But they didn't succeed.

But there was nothing, it was all see- The sea was as if they had removed all the stones, there was nothing. The southern part of the island, there was a part that we really liked to go to, which is the mouth of the bioluminescent bay, that area there, it's like very alive, and there was nothing, it was sand, pure sand, clear, white, and you could see the bottom as if the boat was floating, you could see the shadow, there was absolutely nothing, and you continued and there was nothing.

[01:09:40]

Nothing.

Nothing. And when we got fish for the first time, after a long time, it was like dividing up a little bag of maybe nine or ten fish, so everyone could have a piece of fish, and they would make broths, they would do whatever, and it was like, wow, eating something delicious, for so many months, for so long, it was almost—

How many months do you think?

I would say six months.

Six months, to be able to find it.

And.

And what happened? How did you manage your business? Because you told me you lost everything.

We were closed for fourteen months.

Closed.

One year.

But the building-

The building stayed, yes.

But damaged.

Yes. The whole sea came into the business, and everything was full of- The ceiling is like 15 feet maybe, no, it's ten, it was with seaweed on the ceiling, all in an artisanal way, it looked like a spiral drawing, inside the business.

Do you have any photos from that time?

Yeah.

If you have one. Maybe if you could send it to me it would be interesting.

This part, the sand, shifted about 20 feet. The road—all the roads were made of sand—and the door, we had to remove it. We had to shovel the sand out. It was like five feet of sand, meaning the waves came so far from the shore. And inside the business, everything was covered in seawater and sargassum. The windows were made of glass, and they were all broken inside, with sand in the frames—it was crazy.

When your children returned, did they start building it again, or cleaning it up?

[01:11:58]

We started cleaning it, I think, after two weeks. I took pictures because obviously seawater damages everything electronic, metals much more quickly, and it grows mold. The first day, we had a water tank, and we pulled it out with that, waiting, because we didn't know if the equipment would work or not, because there was no electricity to test it, so we cleaned it, and we cleaned everything. After maybe a week and a half, we cleaned everything, and we closed the cracks in the windows with wood we found right there, and we went back every so often, taking things out, cleaning, little by little; We were like that for about two months, and maybe in January, that was in September, and in January they brought some generator plants, and they gave them to the business owners, everyone who had a business license, they gave them one, and we got one that was huge, but it needed gasoline for that, and there was no gasoline, the lines for gasoline were endless, they were lines that lasted days, ridiculous, there were people who were in lines for 12 hours. And why would I turn on such a huge plant, that won't last me at all, it'll last five hours, eight hours, and the line, and I didn't have anything to store it either, so we left it there on standby until finally- It was in January a lot of people came by during that time and they started putting electricity in with generators, they went piece by piece. After that we were able to test and confirm how much the equipment had been damaged, and from there, organizations that helped us with that. That was practically the only help we got, to buy a refrigerator and freezer, nothing more, the rest was crazy, everything was crazy.

But they survived.

Yes, and it didn't go so badly for us. The whole situation was sad, but it was sad to see more people losing their lives in the process, due to a lack of medicine like insulin, because there was no boat, these people with cancer, and that part was horrible, because it was knowing that there was a possibility of helping them but there were no resources for it, and something as simple as insulin, something as simple as a dose of chemo, they had to make a plan that must exist here today after that tragedy, because it changes lives, that's life or death.

[01:15:34]

If something like this happens again, do you think there's a better plan? What do you think? If Maria does it again, what do you think? What would happen?

As a community, as grassroots organizations that emerged after Maria, and there were many, I think we can handle the situation with a little more clarity, and hope that the administration here can be more effective in the area of ​​​​it arrives, at least the treatments. For me, it's unforgivable that the cancer treatment wasn't managed, and dialysis, as we had many patients with those two conditions, something should have been thought out and planned so that it wouldn't happen, so that they wouldn't suffer this lack of service. But, like many grassroots organizations that emerged after that, a lot was learned, we learned a lot, but we're not ready. And the electrical system is worse than the one we had for Maria. I don't think they've practiced much in emergency planning either. We're not ready. I continue to believe that grassroots organizations are the ones that will continue to keep this afloat—

[01:17:35]

And what are those organizations? I was told about one you were part of.

From there, La Colmena Cimarrona was born, a community-based project, from which La Semillera and El Panal emerged. And what was done in María is something that has continued to be done over time, like with this organization. Right now, there's an event on rented land, of which about five or so are being worked on, where planting is done, workshops are offered, and the idea is to address the issue of food sovereignty, looking at it from a different, non-capitalist perspective. But yes, so that people are a little more prepared and have resources at hand, and among that, the issue of food, plants that heal. There was an organization that was there, oh my God, Taller Salud, which is another organization that offered some really good workshops, monitoring sugar, blood pressure, emotional issues. They also brought in specialists, psychologists, everything. There was acupuncture, which addressed health issues in a holistic way, but it arrived, it reached people to receive that benefit, and they trained a few of us, maybe 15 or 20 of us, so that from here they wouldn't have to come, but rather the services were provided right here. On that note, I'll tell you that on the community side, we prepared or organized ourselves in a way for when all these emergency situations arose, perhaps to help. But after Maria, maritime transportation changed, the energy issue changed, and all of that makes it difficult and less accessible for us to solve the problem, because now it's private, and now it's worse, and now it's an uphill battle. I mean, on the one hand, we prepared, but on the other hand, the state is strangling us. I don't know if you understand me.

Yes I understand.

That issue, the issue of organizing and preparing ourselves, exists, but we don't know if the state is ready for it. I dare say no.

And the local people, who are part of this network, the emergency community, are they a mix of women and men, or are they mostly women?

[01:20:57]

The majority are women, even La Colmena Cimarrona. There's only one man who works in the organization, but the majority are women, and the majority of people who receive support or help or something, almost all of us are women, the majority. Women are in everything, in some very important places worldwide, I think. It's not like it's exclusive to here, but here, women are normally the ones who are leading the issues of everything, of starting to organize ourselves as community members, neighbors. Everything was born and emerged from women, and the men were like the support, let's bring, to look for this, to stop this, but the majority are women. Planning, organizing, preparing, cooking, planting, everything came from women, very proud.

Really. Do you personally consider yourself a leader in your community?

I wouldn't say that, I always- The version of leader, sometimes it's like who goes up front and the others on the sides, I always want to go next to someone, not in front, it's how we do everything, and yes, in fact, I think we've treated each other that way, one for example was excellent with the census, well she was dealing with the census; I was good in the kitchen, I was with the cooking; the other was good at calling people, the other did the planting, and in that way we were companions. I always prefer that part, of course, walking side by side with people, not feeling, or that they think that the word leader goes to someone in front.

Is there anything else you want to tell me, that you wanted people to know?

No, I think I got everything out.

I want to thank you for taking the time and telling me what you told me. I know it was hard to tell me about the hurricane. It's a very difficult time. I thank you for opening up and telling me all of this. I appreciate it.

[01:23:51]

Thank you. It's difficult, but at the same time, we grow every time we say it, and it makes me a little sad with everything that's happening, and we continue to see how things, these natural phenomena, a Category 1 or Category 5 hurricane, turn into nothing, without warning, like this, it can happen to any of us, and we're almost seeing this happen these days, for tomorrow, Wednesday.

Wednesday.

And I have my sister-in-law, she lives in Florida.

Where?

Palm something, I don't know, it's Palm Beach, Palm.

That's a bit, it's south.

It's a little further north, but east. It's something like Palm, I don't know the other word palm,

No es Palm Beach.

No.

No.

No, it's something of, I don't remember, but-

But it's okay.

So big, and so, category five, it terrifies me to think about it, because I think about everything, because sometimes we, I told you that it was when Maria hit, it was in Puerto Rico, and they said it was category four, that was more than category five, it was a monster. Its winds were screaming, and the walls of the cement houses were shaking, it was seeing the windows, everything vibrating in a house, in cement houses, strongly. I think, I don't know, I don't even want to think about it, but Florida has me—in addition to affecting us directly regardless, because that's where our marketing port is. If there's an absence of ships, we're going to feel the same lack of merchandise that normally affects us, so it's tight any way you look at it.

Okay, I'm going to turn this off.