# FOR LIFETIMES TO COME

Oral Histories from the
Voice of Witness
Community Voices Initiative

2025-26

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# INTRODUCTION

The Community Voices Initiative (CVI) course was a virtual storytelling class designed by the oral history nonprofit, Voice of Witness. Over seven weeks, participants from a range of nonprofit, community, and advocacy backgrounds called in from across the United States (some even from outside the country) to take a deep dive together into oral history practices and ethical storytelling principles, with the final goal of interviewing someone in their community. We explored the art of interviewing, listening, and editing while also honoring the voices and truths of our narrators. We asked ourselves, *how do you create a safe, brave space for sharing meaningful stories?*

It was my honor to facilitate the CVI course across three different cohorts in 2025 and 2026, with over 35 participants. I was moved by the curiosity, kindness, and thoughtfulness of all the participants, both in interacting with each other and caring for the stories of their narrators. The six narratives included in this collection are just a small sample of the diverse, vibrant interviews collected across the CVI classes. Each of the narrators here are quite different–in background, profession, and age. But what I believe unites them is a clear passion for living life to the fullest. I hope these stories will inspire you, the reader, to live life to the fullest as well and to listen to all the human stories that surround you every day with empathy and openness. The title of this collection is inspired from narrator Ahtoy's powerful reflections on how Indigenous dance traditions can continue to share memories through the body, perhaps so that those memories and connections persist "for lifetimes to come." Oral history, at its ideal core, is a way to preserve the words and reflections of those we care about so their legacies may stretch across geography, generations, and lifetimes, too.

-Ela Banerjee
Voice of Witness Community Partnership Manager
May 2026

# ANDI

## Interviewed & Edited by Adam Azzalino

***Andrea "Andi" Havens*** *was born in Milwaukee but spent most of her childhood and teenage years in California. She returned in 1997 after attending college. She has always had a passion for genealogical research and family history, ignited by stories from her grandmother about the Irish side. She currently works for the Milwaukee Archdiocese as an Archival Assistant. In 2012, her daughter became interested in Irish dancing after seeing a performance at the local Irish Fest in Milwaukee. This led to her daughter becoming involved with the Kinsella Irish Dance Academy and competing in local and international Irish dance competitions. Andi supports and assists at these events.*

My daughter is a competitive Irish dancer. And she dances for Kinsella Irish Dance Academy. We kind of fell into the Irish dance community in a way. She was born in 2012, and we were very lucky that when I was in school, my mother-in-law was retired, and so she was our primary caretaker for my daughter when we were in work and school, respectively. And we thought, well, you know, getting her into something else would be, you know, obviously would be good for her socialization and making little friends and learning from other teachers. And we were at Irish Fest in 2014, and our friend at the time had a son who was dancing with Kinsella. And we said, hey, let's go check him out and go support our friend. And you know, she just was very into the performance the whole time, and she's on my husband's shoulders, just really kind of getting into it and having fun. And we thought, well, maybe we'll try Irish dance and see if there's somewhere that can take her, because she's pretty young and, you know, we know not necessarily everyone would take a two year old. But sure enough, the company, Kinsella, this smaller family-run organization, they were taking kids as young as two and it was great. And we just never knew that 11 years later she'd still be with it.

We learned as she progressed through the years of dance that it's basically a year-round sport. And then around Thanksgiving time, there's something called the Euroctys, which is a regional competition, and I don't remember how many regions there are that make up like America. Mexico's included. We're in the Mid-America region, and so at least for us, you know, it's Thanksgiving. And then after Christmas, the kids start gearing up for the Worlds competition, which is close to Easter. And then after that is complete, the next season is the Nationals season, which the competition takes place right around July 4th weekend. Or right around that, that holiday. And the holidays are usually the time that these are scheduled because it's, you know, obviously the time most likely where the kids are going to be off of school and it won't interfere with their education.

Our Arachnidus competitions will always change locations, Nationals will always change locations, Worlds will always change locations. So each year it's kind of different for us. This year, for example, our world competition is coming up at the end of the month, and this year it's going to be in the Chicago area, specifically in Schaumburg. But in years past, she's also danced in Montreal, and she's danced in Glasgow, Scotland, and she's danced in Dublin, Ireland.

Usually as the kids get close to a competition, they'll have a daily practice, and the competitions themselves are basically scheduled day by day, kind of by age group. And I don't know if there's —if it's consistently every year, like youngest starts the first day and oldest starts the last day, or vice versa. I'm not sure if that's the same every year, or maybe it kind of switches around just kind of based on who's registered and you know, what's happening that year. So anyway, say my daughter's dancing on a Saturday, so usually we get in, as you know, maybe say on Wednesday or Thursday so that she's acclimated to the time change. And then usually there's going to be a set practice the day before each category's competition, so then she would join in on the Friday practice for her day. Of dance on Saturday. Dance competitions usually start at about 8 o'clock in the morning.

[My role is] chauffeur, shoe tier, water-bottle filler, costume purchaser, whatever we have needed at the exact time. My daughter has also danced on different teams before, in which cases her teachers have chosen to put the girls in the full wigs, which is, you know, all the curls and the, the whole ball of wax. So we get the girls up early, we get them breakfast, they've got makeup to put on. There's certain stage makeup that needs to be worn. The girls usually have to tan their legs. It's never been one of my favorite things to do, but I guess it has to do with maybe the stage lighting showing like musculature, kind of knowing how it's so the judges can maybe see better how the legs are moving. It's kind of a guess of mine. Maybe just kind of part of the— become part of the traditional costuming. So then all of this happens. The tanning usually happens the night before or a couple of nights before the competition. Anyway, we usually get up probably about 4:30 in the morning or so for getting the ball rolling on the hair, the makeup, getting breakfast, all that kind of stuff, and then getting over to the venue in time to kind of acclimate. So anyway, fast forward then to getting back to All-Ireland in Killarney. So girls usually are dancing in the mornings, and it might be boys too. Girls usually have to get up quite considerably earlier, which I will say is kind of a thorn in my side because I think that the boys having less get ready time—I think that girls should start dancing later, but that's just my personal opinion. Girls traditionally wear different kinds of wigs. Our school has mostly always used what's called a bun wig, which just kind of looks like a pile of curls on the top of the girl's head.

I'm proud to be my grandmother's granddaughter. I'm proud to come from the line that I come from. My daughter was named after my great-grandma, who is part of my Irish ancestry. So their names are both Veronica. My two loves in life are making things with my hands and genealogy and family history. Currently, I'm working on a contract project at the Milwaukee Archdiocese. I'm working in their archives department. I'm working with their prenuptial files that need a little tidying up. They are in need of like eliminating some of the redundancy in their forms, getting rid of documents that no longer I guess are needed in the each and the respective collections. And so it's just, it's really cool because I get to see people coming up in the city that, that I know, I get to see familiar names of, you know, maybe businesses that these families might be connected to.

You know, you see birth certificates, you see death certificates, you can see how people lived. I don't know, I just, I find it all fascinating. I find it so much more interesting in history than just what we're given in the history books. And that's important too, but it's, you know, I think it's not the same kind of history that really keeps me going,

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***ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER/EDITOR:*** *Adam Azzalino holds an MA in Public History from University-Wisconsin-Eau Claire and has conducted over a dozen oral histories for various projects with universities, museums and historical societies. He has also written articles on local history for magazines and newspapers, including a column in the Ozaukee County News-Graphic from 2016-2018. He continues to follow his passion for oral history education.*

# AHTOY

## Interviewed & Edited by Raiesa Ali

***Dr. Ahtoy Juliana WonPat-Borja*** *grew up on Guam and has indigenous Chamoru and Cuban ancestry. She began her professional dance training in childhood, studying with the Houston and San Francisco Ballet Companies. Ahtoy has been a part of the Afro-Latinx dance community since she moved to New York City at 17 years old. Since then, she has sought to share the legacy of Afro-Latinx dance culture through her work as a performer, choreographer, educator, and activist. In 2006, Ahtoy co-founded BAILA Society, a cultural arts organization and dance school rooted in the preservation and celebration of Afro-Latinx social dance. As Artistic Director of BAILA Society and a World Champion, she has shaped the global salsa community and is dedicated to preserving Afro-Latinx dance culture, heritage, and artistic expression. She recently co-founded Not Just Chisme, an alliance dedicated to addressing issues of sexual misconduct and gender inequality in the Afro-Latinx social dance industry. Ahtoy holds a PhD in epidemiology from Columbia University and teaches Latin Hustle and its cultural history at Scripps College.*

I was 12 years old when I first left the island by myself to go study with Houston Ballet. I was so joyful. I was so innocent. Dance was going to ignite me the moment that I started moving. Interestingly, in my language, we don't have a word for dance, at least not one that remains through colonization. Singing, dancing, chanting are all one. I grew up in Guam, as part of the Chamoru people, or the indigenous people of Guam. We've been in the Marianas Islands for about 5,000 years but we've been under various world powers [as a colony] for nearly 400 years. We remain a colony of the U.S. today.

At a young age, I wasn't able to separate dance as a thing that I really wanted to do. But I felt it very strongly in my body. I was maybe as young as 6 years old when we started learning American Sign Language in school. We would sign popular songs and go to senior living facilities and perform for the elderly. I was very elaborate with my hand movements because it was to music. I didn't realize until later that I was dancing with my hands. We had one ballet school [in Guam] that was incredible and it was run by a former principal dancer of Joffrey Ballet and the Houston Ballet, and his wife. I was 10 years old when I met this classmate who joined that ballet school. The word ‘ballet’ opened up this world of possibilities to me and I was instantly obsessed with the idea. She invited me to her recital and I begged my dad to take me. Propped up on his shoulders in the back, I was spellbound. All I was able to say was, *‘I want, I want.’*

When I got in, I didn't need much time to understand what I was supposed to do with my body. I grew up with such confidence and happiness in my dance studio in Guam. I was surrounded by other Indigenous girls so I didn't know that there were social hierarchies. I would always dance in the front of the room. It's just where I thought I should be. In very little time, I was being pushed into the more advanced classes. I was able to get a scholarship. Ballet became this really specific path that I had exposure and access to. I often wonder how my pure love of dance would have expressed itself had those exposures been different. I wish I would have had a way to explore a different understanding of dance–social, cultural–that would be much more connected to who I am as a Chamoru.

Ballet, though, is the dance that is the most codified. They have a prototype. And it's not just how you dance, but it's what you look like and what kind of bodies are allowed in the space. At that time, Houston Ballet used to host auditions for their academy. It was a very exclusive process. So I'm in this audition with all these other kids, almost all white kids, and I put myself in the front. And I'm just going and I'm smiling and I'm so happy. At some point, I realized that the director put up his clipboard to his face. I wasn't sure what was going on, why he was doing this. I realized that he was trying to not see me. He was annoyed that I was in the front and he wanted to stop being distracted by my presence by blocking the side of his face so that he could look at the other dancers. That was day one.

I was bewildered by other people's insistence of my place in the world. I don't think my parents or my community could have prepared me for what the U.S. was like in terms of race and class. Both sides of my family consider themselves to be public servants [and they] did a lot of community work. My mom was an educator, then a politician. My father was a biologist for the Environmental Protection Agency eventually and he used protecting the environment as a way of protecting humanity. Like many people, he believed that science is neutral. It's lofty, it's objective, and that's a place where we can be equal and our aspirations can be met. I thought that too and I think he wanted that for me. I was 17 when I came to study at Barnard College and then continued at Columbia all the way through my PhD. It wasn't a safe, happy place for me. My basic memories are so much associated with being homesick, navigating race, class, sexism, elitism. I was going to experience a sexual assault in those years. By this time, my father had also committed suicide when I was 16. I almost didn't graduate because I had so much trauma.

But this is the time where I find salsa. I met kids at Columbia who were in a program called HEOP, the Higher Education Opportunity Program. They got funding for first-generation college students and I met a lot of Latinos who were, [like me], going out into a new world for themselves and their families. They were literally like, *'Come here, mija. You're going to be over here. Come dance with us.'* I was like, *'There's a place where I can go and people want me here and we're going to dance and we're going to dance together? This is like a dream.'*

Part of my community work today is helping survivors of sexual assault. So much of how I understand myself is also through my work with a cultural arts organization called, Navatman. They are preserving classical Indian dance and music. The director, Sahi, simply believed in me and what we [BAILA Society] do. She has a very important understanding of the limitations that minority communities face in the arts and is very determined to overcome those things. In the first year of our relationship, all we did was talk about our values, the things we learned from our ancestors. We made art with that. We [produced a showcase] together and it was about us–the way we live our lives every day. When we are being oppressed and we are being met with violence every single day just for existing–telling the world what we do, how we love, express ourselves: that is the story. It was a smashing success. We're in the process already of doing our second show. We have our communities that are creating original music, bringing our dancers, writers, and art forms together. We're much bolder now and courageous. We know what our connections are and we can tell that story in so many different ways.

I'm discovering this deep purpose of dance and I understand what my purpose is now in sharing that and bringing to everyone's attention that these dances are so deeply rooted in the suffering and survival of our ancestors. In the joy, this persistent, stubborn joy that they continued to have for generations despite everything they were battling. My work is to make that connection more plainly for people and to call [those] into this space who are really seeking that connection. Through my journey as a Chamoru, I'm a strong, strong believer that we can call our ancestors through our bodies; through song, chant, and dance. We don't have much in terms of memory of our dance [because of colonization] but that knowledge lives inside of us; we're just not connected to it.

My generation of creators have reimagined what Indigenous dance would look like and I have witnessed how the embodied memories can appear and be conjured from the past. If that is a form of deep reclamation for Indigenous people, it has to be that way for Afro-Latinos and other people who are carrying on some form of dance from their ancestors. That is going to be the part of history that I am most excited for and looking forward to: calling for that re-creation and reimagination through my own body and facilitating that through other people's bodies. That will be the memory. It will last for our lifetimes. But if we keep sharing it, then maybe it can persist for lifetimes to come.

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***ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER/EDITOR:*** *Raiesa Ali is a Guyanese-American writer and poet originally from New York. She is influenced and inspired by stories arising from communities of color and believes in the power of artivism to activate communities that are continually and strategically silenced. Raiesa has a professional background in international and domestic human rights advocacy, community engagement, and youth empowerment. Raiesa serves as Lead Editor for the Indo-Caribbean Beauty Magazine, writing pieces that explore cultural preservation, wellness, and intergenerational storytelling. Her writing has appeared in PREE, the Indo-Caribbean Beauty Magazine, and a 2026 book entitled, Search Work: A Collective Inquiry into the Job Hunt. She volunteers as a mentor with Girls Write Now and recently received her certificate in Equity-Centered Storytelling from Storytellers for Change. As a first-generation graduate, Raiesa holds a master's in international affairs from Columbia University.*

# JAMES

## Interviewed & Edited by Melanie Faranello

***James Dale*** *is a CT Transit bus driver, poet, father, and entrepreneur*

BRONX BEGINNINGS

I grew up in the Bronx by way of Jamaica. About six blocks from Yankee Stadium. My parents came to New York in the 70s. A buddy of mine, his grandmother lived on the 21st floor in a building right across from the stadium, so we would watch the games from her balcony. Where the Yankee stadium is now, we skateboarded, rode bikes, played soccer, stick ball, hand ball in the park, all kinds of stuff—there was Mullaly Pool right over there, too. When I was eleven, we moved to the East side of the Bronx.

My three older brothers were very protective, and they taught me the ropes, how to circumnavigate the system. 'Cause I grew up in the 80s where crack and crime was prevalent. They had to pretty much protect us from “the wolves” of the street, 'cause back in the 80s and early 90s, it was pretty hectic in the city. So if they weren't strong willed, I wouldn't be here standing.

SURVIVAL

Living in it, you don't realize the dangers that you’re around. How to walk, where to go, what the different sounds mean— sirens or gunshots, or different calls, you know. Summertime, you could mistake a gunshot from a firecracker or M80 because, you know, July 4th. But the rest of the 11 months, if you hear that loud pop, you know it was a shot. You learn when to duck, when not to duck, when to run, when not to run. Growing up in it, I didn't think I was in danger. Until I got out.

MOVING TO HARTFORD

I came here when I was nineteen. When I first moved here, I saw it [bus driving] as something I could do to facilitate a means to an end. I wanted to go into advertising. A lot of those commercials in the 80s were very memorable, like the Wendy's commercial, Where's the Beef? You know, the guy with the Rolls-Royce, and he rolls down the window, Do you have any Gray Poupon? Very memorable.

I went to school and got my bachelor's degree to learn how to write scripts. I wrote a spec script/commercial for one of my products for the juice company that I just started with my coworker.

The juice company is my retirement plan. It's my 20th year driving busses. It takes a toll on your body. I'm working on the next phase of my existence now. Everybody should take a chance on themselves, delve deeper, and challenge themselves. Because Tomorrow is not promised.

DRIVING A BUS

On the bus, you'll have people from different walks of life getting on. When I started driving, almost 20 years now, a passenger said, "There's a passenger back there naked." I pulled over and went back and sure enough, he was naked as the day he was born. I called and dispatch laughed at me. I was new, probably two months in.

I got my CDL [Commercial Driver's License] to go back to New York to drive for the MTA, but you know, God had different plans.

WRITING

The Jamaican culture is about storytelling. When we grew up, we would hear all kinds of stories. When my pops passed away in '93, I started writing poetry, that was part of my coping mechanism. It helped. It's a creative release. The first poem I ever wrote was called "Butter Soft." It was about a girl, a crush that I had. I wrote it on a four-page letter, sprayed it with Drakkar cologne, put it in the envelope, and I handed it to her. I created a poetry book, Just Another Hopeful Fool in Love, with one of my brothers.

INSPIRED BY EVERYDAY LIFE

I want to branch out and write from other perspectives, like if I was a bird or a lion or a leaf on the ground. Try to see how creative I can be, test myself. The characters I encounter in my everyday life inspire my poetry. I've written two urban fiction books based on my life in the Bronx and living in Hartford. I wrote a series of stories called, The Pen is Mightier than the Sword—cautionary tales, like how you should always look within yourself and not to somebody else to validate you. That's a goal, to inspire people to be creative, be more than what you think you are, what society tells you you are.

JAMAICAN ROOTS/MAKING JUICE

My grandparents used to sell roots in Jamaica. My grandmother sold vegetables in the market. My grandfather was a farmer. He raised pigs, big sow, in Jamaica, way up in the mountains. He was known for making tinctures. From roots, plants, barks of trees, cinnamon—to help you with anything that ails you. My mother used herbs and gave us cerasee tea as a cleanse, red clover for respiratory issues, hyssop for an upset stomach. My uncle Job taught me about herbs we use for our root drinks now. Every Sunday, my mother made carrot juice, and we had to grate carrots, nutmeg, beets, put it in a cloth, squeeze out the juice.

STARTING A JUICE COMPANY

My middle child is lactose intolerant, so I used Chufa, a food they use in Africa and Spain—tigernut, and I made that into milk, blended it with grains. Put in a little cinnamon and nutmeg and vanilla, and she loved it. When I met my co-worker who sold juice products to local Jamaican restaurants, I brought him a sample mixed with Irish moss, a seaweed. He never tasted anything like that.

He devised the idea to start our own juice company. Na Cha Rize. We have a space on Blue Hills Avenue in Hartford now. We're the works of getting the store fully open. We got a Power Punch, which is mixed with spirulina and turmeric and sea moss.

Certain products help eliminate things that bog down our body—living in the city, cell towers, pollution from cars and buses, interaction with people who are not positive. When you focus on your personal health, it turns you into a superhero.

FOOD AS EMPATHY

I travel back home often because most of the herbs and roots we use for our juice grow in Jamaica. But two of the farms we get our herbs from were decimated recently by Hurricane Melissa.

Cooking is therapeutic. If you can't afford to buy someone a gift, cook them a meal. That's one thing I think we should do to bring everybody togetherL stop the wars and the differences, and just cook. Have a big amalgam of foods from different cultures and once you taste something, you can empathize with where that person came from and ask about it—how do they get their ingredients? And then their life story comes into play, and you humanize that person. And it's not, "this Chinese person" or "this Russian person," but it's, "Oh, John!" or "Mr. Lu," and you won't think you're better than anybody.

*To help with James Dale's GoFundMe efforts, visit his links to support Na Cha Rize at (bit.ly/3RABkBL) and the two farms in Jamaica affected by the hurricane (bit.ly/4fh59RB)*

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***ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER/EDITOR:*** *Melanie Faranello is an award-winning author, teaching artist and founder of Poetry on the Streets, a community engagement project bringing people's words into public spaces for social impact. She's the author of Everybody Needs Something, which received the Donald L Jordan Prize for Literary Excellence. Her fiction and essays have been published widely and nominated for Pushcart Prizes. A Creative Community Fellow with National Arts Strategies, she has taught for over two decades in NYC, Chicago, and Hartford. She's currently working on a novel and a community public art project. Read more at: www.melaniefaranello.com*

# JESÚS

## Interviewed & Edited by keziah aurin

***Jesús*** *is the Career Pathways Manager at Immigrants Rising, the founding coordinator of the former Pre-Law Pathways Program for undocumented students, and the author of the Law School Resource Guide for Undocumented Students: Getting to Law School. As a Career Pathways Manager, Jesus focuses his time and advocacy on building career pipelines for undocumented individuals.*

*Jesús was born in Mexico and grew up in California surrounded by family. His experiences as a gay, low-income ESL student and as a caretaker for his sister with disabilities have shaped his relationship with immigration law, access, and mobility.*

*Driven to challenge the status quo for marginalized communities, Jesús has a long history of advocacy. He was part of the founding staff of the Undocumented Student Resource Center at UC Davis, participated in the UCLA Labor Center's Dream Summer, and became the first undergraduate researcher for the Unaccompanied Minors Project at the UC Davis School of Law. Now, Jesús serves on Dream Summer's Alumni Council. Jesús was one of the first to ever travel with Advance Parole. With a full scholarship in hand, he conducted research on human rights violations against migrants that informed policy proposals to improve conditions for migrants in Mexico.*

*Jesús deeply values the dignity and worth of every individual, the significance of human relationships, and the importance of pushing for our collective personal and professional growth. He believes that uniting our experiences and voices creates the power to drive change, transforming not just individual cases but entire systems.*

SHIFTING THE CULTURE / "I AM A DIFFERENCE MAKER"

Immigration is very fluid. Anything you have could be taken away at any moment. You could receive benefits, be granted a visa, or have access to something, only to have it taken away. What if, on the other hand, you witnessed or survived a crime and you become eligible for a green card? Your life can change.

I see this story of fluidity in my family. We're originally from Mexico, but everyone has moved to the States for better opportunities. I saw their trajectories, how they've evolved here in the U.S., how they pursue economic mobility and generate income for themselves. Even without all the answers, they found ways to thrive. 's not just status or money that can be fluid; it can be who you are, too. My relatives came from being victims of circumstance to agents of their own stories.

A lot of us came with little to nothing, and now they're able to do a little bit more for themselves. Fluidity shows up in my life, too; I don't like to be stagnant.

**Whenever I see a need, I know that if I can mobilize myself, I can make a difference**. If it's within my capacity, I will make change happen.

It started when I was in high school, in the Latinos Unidos club. I may be Latino, but there are also all these other aspects of myself that are not addressed. I took a risk sharing this with the club. My classmates were open to hearing me, and others started seeing themselves in it, too. There was more visibility, more acknowledgment of other stories, other experiences.

And then, it came into my college experience, when undocumented students had a shared need and craving for a physical space. Once I started meeting other students like me, I realized the need was a lot bigger than I had acknowledged. The barriers and struggles for undocumented students were a national issue. Even when I started small—just with the communities I was already part of—my understanding of our needs kept getting bigger. While I was in college, I worked as the first undergraduate researcher for the Unaccompanied Minors Project at UC Davis, which was very similar to paralegal work for unaccompanied minors. I realized that I loved working with the immigrant community, whether or not it was attached to a higher education institution.

I developed a strong interest in law. I mean, undocumentedness exists because of immigration law. It made me want to go straight to the root of the problem.

When I graduated in 2019, I applied to law schools, but then COVID-19 happened. I took a step back and decided not to go back to school right away. I got accepted to a few schools, but I didn't really get strong financial aid offers. With COVID and everything, I was in survival mode, just wondering whether it was really viable to go to school when I should probably save money. My parents were also struggling financially, and their health was at risk during the pandemic.

I'm a strong believer that things happen for a reason, because once the pandemic settled down, I realized that law school wasn't something I wanted to do. I'm more drawn to sharing knowledge and information with others in a different capacity. Even though I'm still interested in immigration law and law schools, that interest looks different now. I always tell students that career journeys are so fluid.

Now that I'm at Immigrants Rising, where I get to apply all that I've learned to the Pre-Law Pathways Program I created and the going-to-law-school resource I wrote. These were born of realizing that the gaps I had to navigate on my own were the same ones other undocumented, immigrant, Latinx, and working-class students faced in isolation. The gaps still exist, and so do the struggles.

My job is to innovate programs that consider and care for undocumented students' complex experiences while simultaneously preparing them for building a thriving life. The deeper I get into this work, the more I want to keep reaching further.

Both collective and individual wisdom that shape my work have a place in the schools I attended, in my city and state, and throughout the country. It does feel more challenging under this current Administration. How do you build a future with all the uncertainty? How do you dream when you're barred from so many chances at life?

Being directly impacted has helped me create real and tangible possibilities for people in the community. I think that's my secret ingredient. My work is a reflection of myself, including addressing my needs. Sometimes, I create a resource as an answer to my own question or a reflection on things I wish I had. When I see our community really engaging with the work that I've done, it reaffirms that my needs as an undocumented person are also similar to what other people are facing.

My parents instilled in me a core value while I was growing up. They showed me through their actions that once you learn something new and carry a new seed, you have to pass it on to others. The metaphor goes like this: A tree becomes a tree because of the seed that comes before it. And because of that seed, this tree now bears fruit, then shares seeds with the ground. The cycle continues. I think that's my value, too—just continue to spread those seeds of knowledge and hope to more people beyond me.

Immigrants Rising's current Legal Fellow, Gigi, was actually in the very first cohort of the Pre-Law Pathways Program. At the time, she was unsure if law school was the right path for her because each state's bar association is different. They may or may not allow undocumented people to take the bar exam and become licensed attorneys, but she discovered a viable path. She attended the pre-law program and went to all sessions with nine other undocumented students in her cohort. She ended up going to Boston University on a full-tuition scholarship!

That was when I realized, "Oh, my God. This program is really creating change for people." It's not just giving them inspiration or motivation to continue; it's also allowing them to build economic mobility for themselves. Gigi graduated last year. She very recently passed the California Bar Exam, so she can now practice in California! I stay connected with many students who participated in the programs, and they are lawyers now, too, and have given back to the community.

We've weathered harsh storms before, and those experiences will help us get through these ones, too. Our skillful creativity and relentless hope keep doors open until permanent, inclusive immigration laws finally exist. Until then, we remain fluid and make it anyway.

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***ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER/EDITOR:*** *keziah aurin (they/them) is a writer for an immigrant rights nonprofit organization and an M.A. candidate in Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. As a formerly undocumented immigrant, keziah has done a little bit of everything to organize—program coordination, counseling, volunteer mobilization, fundraising, policy research, literary publication, and exhibit curation. Now, keziah's work focuses on narrative change and movement building at the intersections of race, class, queer/transness, and disability justice. Their forthcoming thesis features various queer and trans oral histories and highlights how the embodiment of community care has transformed through the COVID-19 pandemic and mutual aid.*

# JUDY

## Interviewed & Edited by Kim Ranney

***Judy Targan*** *is a 94-year old artist who was raised in New York City and has lived and created art in South Orange, NJ since the 1950s. She spent 40 years running a poster printmaking business out of her home studio. She loves to experiment with materials and process; and is currently focused on creating "fantasy landscapes" using paint on wood. You can see examples of her work and learn more about her at JudyTargan.com.*

I really was involved in art from the day I was born. My parents were very supportive. I can even go back and remember now when I was very young, I used to do what they called potato prints. You took a raw potato, an Idaho potato. You cut it flat, and then you took a knife and made a little design there, and then you took some paint and went over it. So where you had made the design the paint didn't go, and then you put a piece of paper on it. It sounds like it was a big process, but it really wasn't. I was involved with art without going to school about it.

I grew up in New York City. I was born in 1931 in a hospital that was in the Bronx, but I really grew up on the West Side of New York. I knew where every picture was at the Museum of Modern Art. My parents were very into cultural things. My sister and I went very early on to Carnegie Hall every Saturday night. I think Leonard Bernstein was there then. It was like going to school.

My mother was a public school teacher, and she was way ahead of her times. My parents sent [me] to a very progressive school called the Walden School all the way through to high school graduation. We called our teachers by their first names. Of the 25 people in my class, there were 24 guitars and one paintbrush, and that was me. I really lived in the art room. My teacher was Mary Johnson. I would go in there and she would say, just do whatever you want. And I painted away using poster paints. I did all the decorations for the high school dances.

I went to Smith College. They did not have a major in Studio Art. They gave four studio classes, and I took the four of them. But what they had was one of the finest [classes] called Art 101, and it was history of art, starting at caveman. And in my day, it only went up to the beginnings of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s when it started. The making of art was very little. But the history was marvelous.

When I graduated, I had a job. I was supposed to go to law school. I wanted to be an artist, but you couldn't just *be* an artist. I got a job at the League of Women Voters in the city, and I ran the mimeograph machine. I do remember thinking, I want to be one of these rich ladies that come in and write these papers on civil liberties and things like that, all of which I could do very well. But there I was running the mimeograph machine.

*[Judy later moved to South Orange, NJ with her husband and children where she worked as a printmaker daily out of her home studio for decades.]*

I bought my own press. And that whole wall where pictures are was shelves, drying racks. And this whole wall was inks and brayers. I had full-time help here with me. Print help. And we were very busy, and we were doing full editions.

I was working every day. There were a number of people around who were art consultants. Now, you couldn't carry around a portfolio of a piece of paper, so they had to be shrink-wrapped, these prints. And up on the third floor, I have a shrink-wrap machine, which I'm still using. They have to be shrink-wrapped up onto foam core so these people could carry it around. I was buying paper wholesale. I was buying foam core wholesale.

I really was a printmaker for 40 years here. I would design the print. I would cut the plates. I would choose the colors. I would do one. I was doing a rather complicated process. It was two processes. It was both color, and I was doing that in what you call a rainbow roll, and then I was also embossing with inkless intaglio.

*[Judy walks me around her studio; her recent paintings – all "Fantasy Landscapes" – adorn the walls and work tables. She's explaining her process to me].*

I will start and have an idea of what I want, but I will take chalk, and it's been Gessoed first. Then I take chalk, and I start to draw it on, and then I take a cloth and wipe it off, and then I do it again and again and again, and it usually [takes] quite a while I'm doing the chalk. "This should be moved a little this way" [for example], and I just wipe it off and do it again. And when I finally get to where I want it, I then do it in pencil around the chalk. Then I wet a cloth and wipe away all the chalk. But the pencil remains.

Sometimes I start erasing parts of the pencil to get it just where I want it. And then I choose colors, and then I change colors. I build it. It takes a long time.

Since each one is done as a unique [painting], they're becoming more or less, surrealistic. These are ladybugs – obviously – [but] they're totally out of sync size-wise with the birch trees. There's a lot of thought that goes in, balance, you know. When the oil paint is still wet, I scratch with an etching tool, or I take something else. I make patterns. So it takes a long time. It takes me longer now to finish one with my eye problem and because of my age. But it has always been a thought process. It's not fast.

What brings me joy? It's not this work, it's the passion of it. It really does give me joy. Every day.

***ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER/EDITOR:*** *Kim Ranney's love of oral history began in childhood while listening to family stories at her grandparent's dining room table. Years later she interviewed her elders once she realized the power of preserving those stories in their voices. That experience sparked a broader interest in oral history and deepened her belief that everyone has stories to tell.*

*Kim lives in South Orange, NJ, with her husband and two kids. She has spent my career doing nonprofit digital Communications work and currently consults with nonprofits to help them reach their target audiences. Good storytelling is always at the heart of the work.*

*Kim continues to deepen her oral history skills, by interviewing family, friends and community members. She is working with a local nonprofit, the Luckiest Foundation, to create an oral history program for high school students in our community, which plans to launch in the fall. In May 2024, Kim shared her own story on the Listen To Your Mother North Jersey stage.*

# PAMELA

## Interviewed & Edited by Felicia Henry-Conteh

*Born on the small island of Jamaica,* ***Pamela Henry*** *discovered her passion for cooking at a tender age. She is the mother of four children and four grandchildren. She loves to travel, interact with people, drink tea, and, of course, cook. Her Kingston home was always filled with laughter, especially on Sundays after church, which became a celebration of food and community as she helped prepare meals for the guests. After migrating to New York City, Pamela continued this tradition, turning their home into a welcoming place for family and friends to gather, enjoy hearty meals, and celebrate fellowship.*

PAMELA'S KITCHEN ORIGIN STORY

As a young girl growing up in Jamaica, you were always told you must know how to cook because they always come with the saying, *Oh, make sure you learn how to cook. Because if yuh ah get a husband, yuh haffi know weh yuh ah do. You haffi know how fi cook cause no man wah no woman weh nuh know how fi cook.* And so you try your best to learn how to.

Around 10, 12 years old is when I got interested in cooking because my oldest sister migrated to the United States, so now we [my other sister] have to do it. [Once I migrated to the States], there were always people at my house. There were always people coming in, especially on a Sunday. I would then help my mom and my Auntie to cook. And it was such a pleasure. I started doing a lot more cooking because I'm like, *Okay, let me help you with this. Okay, let me do this. Let me do that*. Because I want to have those companies. They're not going home to eat dinner, so why not make them dinner? Why not just cook? And from there, I just started learning how to do everything.

And of course, I then start having children, and it gives me more pleasure to cook for them and my husband by then. So that's where the love comes from. I could just whip up just about anything. I embedded it in myself to make breakfast for my children and make dinner for them. No matter what it is. For me, I feel more satisfied.

FORGING HER PATH

In my cooking, I start learning how to do things a little bit differently than what I had learned back home, and what I had learned when I started cooking with my mom and my Auntie. I start learning to do shortcuts, but effective shortcuts. [One of the meals I started experimenting with was] rice and peas. So, the process I remembered, growing up, you soak the peas overnight, then you boil the peas in the morning in the same water. After the peas are boiled, you put in the coconut. After the coconut is cooked, you add salt and pepper. After that kind of comes together, you put in the seasoning like the pimento, scallion, thyme, and you allow that to cook again for certain minutes.

And after that all simmer down, then you add the rice. So, my shortcut to that is I put everybody in the pot. I will soak my peas, of course, overnight. I put in the peas, the salt and pepper, the garlic, the pimento, the scallion, the thyme, and the coconut milk. And everybody, I said, will love each other in the one boil. I feel that they complement each other. Then, in the end, once the peas are cooked with all of those seasonings, I would add my rice. Everybody loves my rice and peas.

COOKING WITH LOVE

I always believe in cooking with a lot of love. I feel like it tastes better. That's me, where I'm cooking and I'm praying over my food, and I love what I'm doing. And so, I feel like people always enjoy what I cook because there's so much love in it. When you are cooking with love, you are extending something to your food that other people will partake in. They will say, *Wow, this tastes good. This really, really tastes good*. And that's the end goal. Cooking with a lot of love. Anything I cook, I don't care if it's for 200 people or is it for my household, I am going to cook it with that same love, with that same cleanliness, with that same patience, and take my time to really make it right.

I always tell people, the number one thing to do is, first and foremost, if you're angry or if you're mad, don't cook. Because I don't care if the person sees you or not, they're going to feel that energy in your food.

Eating is supposed to be an enjoyable thing. If you're going to eat, enjoy what you're eating, and feel good that you just had a meal. And that doesn't just happen in the elite restaurants. It's real food on your plate and it's an experience. I want to see faces smiling. I want to see faces saying, *Oh, that is so good. Thank you for dinner. Thank you for breakfast. Oh, Ma. That tastes so good*. And sometimes I'm looking at you all [her children] and I'm like, *What's so good about that?* It's just that. Whatever the *that* is.

BIRTH OF PAM'S KITCHEN

I worked for a law firm on Wall Street for over 13 years, and I decided to quit because I felt like that was the time to do it. I then ventured into opening a daycare at home, and I saw that on Friday, people didn't cook. I said to myself, *Wait a minute, mostly on a Friday and on a Saturday, I could cook and have family and friends come over and pick up their meal. I know they love my food, and I know they will come and buy it.* I ventured out on that, and that was so successful. Every Friday, every Saturday evening, people would come, telling their friends to come, and get three, four, five, six plates of food.

People started asking me if I could cook for baby showers, church events, parties, just about anything. I'm like, *Catering. Am I capable of doing that?* I said, *Wait a minute. It depends on the numbers, right, Pam?* And preparation. I start writing stuff down as to how much for this, how much it would take me to cook for 10 people, how much it would take me to cook for 20 or 50 people, and so on and so forth. And out of that came Pam's Kitchen. I mean, it was named that, me cooking at home, on the weekends, but it becomes much broader. And there were a lot of recommendations, and people were coming from all over. People from Baltimore, Pennsylvania, Jersey, and Connecticut would come to Brooklyn just because they want to taste. And so that was the real birth of my catering. Pam's Kitchen, BK. New York, New York. The demand is always there, and I love to do it. I love to do it.

JAMAICAN RECIPE: FRIED DUMPLINGS, ACKEE, AND SALTFISH

So, the fried dumpling, I put flour, salt, butter, and baking powder. Because I like when it's fried and you break it, it's crunchy. Measurements, of course. I love to just do *a little bit of this* and *a little bit of that*, but I have started to do a recipe book because a lot of people have requested the stuff that I cook the way I cook it. For the saltfish, you boil it. And I would sometimes boil it twice, depending on how salty it is. And then after boiling it twice in my preparation for everything else, I would just leave it in a pan of cold water to [remove] anything [salt] excess or cool it down.

If I get ackee from Jamaica, I will boil it because it's not yet cooked. Once you put it in the water, it will then turn yellow. When you finish cooking that, strain off the water, and make up that together with the fish. I use garlic, tomatoes, onions, thyme, and pepper. So, you sauté all those onions and tomatoes, and garlic, and whatever else you want to put in there. And once that's sautéed, I then add my saltfish, give it a few more minutes, stirring it occasionally. And then I add the ackee in there and add my black pepper and all that, and just leave it to simmer for a few more minutes. And there you have your fried dumpling, and ackee and saltfish.

MAINTAINING AFRICAN-JAMAICAN FOOD PATHWAYS

[Jamaican food] it's authentic. People love Jamaican food a lot. I didn't take any status survey of that, but I just know that you can open a Jamaican restaurant anywhere in this world, and then you will find people flocking it. Not because it's a new restaurant in town, but the food is authentic. I stick to the Jamaican food because I feel like it tastes good. I've honed my skills - I feel like it's *one, two, three, man. One, two, three*. I say that all the time: *Wah yuh mean yuh nuh kno ow tuh cook rice an peas? Ah jus one two tree. [laughs]*

Jamaican food is not just the cooked food either, like oxtail, the curry goat or mutton, or chicken. You can also find coconut water, sugarcane–those are like staples. You can get callaloo. In your yard, you can pick breadfruit, ackee, and mango. Soursoup. All these fruits could be in a regular yard in Kingston. Not even in the country, but in Kingston. And these are things you go outside in the morning, and you just go pick. There are so many other things we as Jamaican pride ourselves with. And you go to Jamaica, somebody's always there to ask if you want some water jelly coconut, or *yuh waan some cane? Should I bring you some mango?*

*JAMAICAN CULTURE*

Jamaican culture is one of love and togetherness. There's a binding with Jamaican people. I mean, they could bind right now, and in two seconds, of course, they will split. But there's always so much love that you can feel it. And if they love you, they love you. You will go to Jamaica, and they're like, *Yuh eva try dis? Yuh eva try daat? Come man, ah gud ting dis, yuh know? Come try it, man. Come try it*. That's the Jamaican people culture. Always wanting to help, always wanting for you to try something, try something new because you have never had it. So, it's rich in those things. It may not be a super-rich country, as we would say, but it's rich in love, people, people, people, people loving each other, people sharing, people being kind. *We likkle but we tallawaa!*

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***ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER/EDITOR:*** Felicia Henry-Conteh is a Black/African-Caribbean (undisciplinary) scholar-artivist. Her creative and scholarly practices engage with multiple dimensions of Blackness, themes of oppression, freedom, humanity, belonging, grief, and joy.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much to all the CVI participants and narrators (both those included in this collection and those beyond) for being part of this course and this community. We are so grateful for your generosity, openness, creativity, and dedication. It has been an honor to collaborate with you.

Thank you to the entire Voice of Witness team for their support in the development and facilitation of this course: Annaick Miller, Binh X. Ngo, Erin Vong Limoges, Fanny García, Jessica Fagen, Kate Garrett, and Natasha Johnson.

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