

11-2012

Helen

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Recommended Citation

"Helen" (2012). *Oral Histories*. Book 9.
http://sophia.stkate.edu/scuvoh_audio/9

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11/14/2012

H's Interview

St Catherine University

H

11/14/2012

L - H, how old are you and where were you born?

H - I'm 22, I'm turning 23 next month and I was born in Miami, Florida.

L - Can you describe the situation when you were growing up? Who was in your family, what was your household like?

H - Being that I don't actually remember a lot of my childhood; I'm just going to go off by what my parents explained to me. I'm a first generation [American] so they are immigrants; they stayed with a bunch of people because they didn't actually have a place to stay. So they stayed with a bunch of people they knew through other people and they were in that kind of situation for a while. _____ Then my mother had me and they moved to another place, where they found some friends from church so they stayed with them for a little bit. And then they had my sister. _____ Then they moved again to another place because my dad was in and out of jobs. Yeah this was all in a [few] years. They didn't have a place to stay so they were just jumping from house to house for years. Just living with friends.

L - I think a lot of immigrants kind of network.

H - Yeah, they know people who know people kind of thing. Then they moved to LA and that's when they had my baby sister and they finally kind of had a little place of their own. It was like... I don't know what they're actually called, but it was in the ghetto. There was crime and our next

door neighbors were total gangsters; they had these huge pitbulls. You could hear guns sometimes and I remember just seeing a lot of tough people growing up.

L - How old were you when you moved to LA?

H - I was 3, I think. When we were in that particular place I don't actually remember how old I was but we moved when I was 8 or 9. We moved to a different place that was kind of like a house but not really because the other place, was just a one bedroom. It had a little space that we made into a living room and a little kitchen area and just all of us lived there: my dad, my mom and my three sisters. Then they moved to this place that wasn't exactly a house either but it had two bedrooms and it had a little living room and a bathroom area. And we only lived there for less than a year because then they decided to move to Minnesota. [My dad's] mother and two sisters had decided to move to Minnesota so he's like I need a job, I need a find a place because he has a hard time keeping jobs I don't know why. It's never more than a year, he would always get fired or laid off or I don't even know. They always gave me excuses but I never really understood growing up because I was like ok, dad isn't working right now.

L - Kids... whatever you know is what you know.

H - Yeah you're a kid; they're not going to sit you down and explain to you right now the economy is this, this and this.

L - So what kind of jobs did he work?

H - He did a lot of truck driving jobs. Never really factories because he just drove all the time. I remember always big trucks, he would sometimes let us climb inside to see...it was high, I always tried to climb up in there, just a bunch of truck driving jobs.

L - Long distances or short distances?

H - I think it was locally. I know he used to work, my mom told me he used to work 14 hours a day, I hardly ever saw him. She was always raising us and in my childhood, I always remember her being around.

L - Three little girls.

H - It was me, my sister and my other sister. Our life was just...mostly in California, what kept us going was the church cause they were really, really into church; so we would be there six days of the week.

L - Catholic church or Protestant church?

H - It was technically a Pentecostal church. It was a Hispanic community they knew people and it was okay. _____ Growing up I had family situation with domestic violence so at the time I didn't think anything was wrong. I didn't think our family was different from any other family. Then we moved to Minnesota and that's kind of when things changed.

L - So you're around 9?

H - Yep I'm 9. So when we moved to Minnesota, I was 10. We again didn't have a place to stay so we decided to stay with his sister who at the time was with her husband, her three kids, and her mother. I can't remember if my other aunt was there too I feel like she was so it was like 6-7 people plus us.

L - And where was this?

H - This was in Plymouth, Minnesota. It was the border of Plymouth and St. Louis (Park). It was an apartment place so we stayed with them and my mom hated it. It was really cramped; no privacy, no space. I don't remember how long we stayed there. It was very stressful for her. She just kept pushing and pushing my dad to find a job quick, try to get out of there because my grandmother and her don't get along because she... I don't know. My grandmother is interesting, she's very interesting. From there, we moved right across the street to an apartment but she was happy because it was a 2 bedroom, it was clean, it was in a safe neighborhood, it was the first time she was out of the ghetto so she's like "oh ok, this is nice." Around this time I was in fifth grade and that's when I started noticing things were different. I was never really around white kids before I was always around Hispanics. So it's just like "Oh people are different here, the place is cleaner."

L - How were the schools?

H - I went to a nice suburban school so a lot of the kids wore certain clothes and spoke a certain way and I just realized that I stuck out like really bad. I was so different and I think that at first they didn't know how to take me because I was really, really, really shy. I was a total introvert, like growing up I only had one friend – I had a single friend. I didn't talk to people but of course moving kind of forced me to speak to somebody.

L - As a kid in Minnesota, who could you rely on? Is it your sisters? Books?

H - That's all I ever did. I just read. I remember whenever my family's situation got hard I would just spend time at the library at school. It wasn't a great library but in Minnesota the libraries were way better, so I tended to be there a lot more._____ I would just read and read and whenever I felt bad, I would just pick up a book and just disappear in it and pretend things were....

L - So did the domestic violence continue?

H - I thought it stopped right after California but it crept up a little. I think I was in high school... my dad... I guess, I don't know why, he just didn't do it when I was around or something.

L - So you weren't a target?

H - No, I used to be but I don't remember it though.

L - Were you really little?

H - I guess I was really little and I blocked it out a lot.

L - Memories protect people too or the lack of memories.

H – Yeah, lack of memories. I feel like I’ve just blocked it. One time I was tying my shoe, I’m pretty sure I was in high school, and my baby sister was in junior high. Well anyway, I look down and I see this big bruise on her leg and I’m just like “Where the hell did you get that?” “Why do you have a bruise on your leg?” And she was like “Well, dad got mad at me.” She basically told me that he hit her and she looked like she was afraid to tell me and I was like “What do you mean he hit you?” I got really angry and I told her if he tries to do that again to let me know. I told her that it’s not ok I’m not going to let that happen.

By this time in school they teach you about homelessness and they teach you about family violence and what’s not ok and what is ok. [] I finally learned what was going on at home was not ok and was not normal and I shouldn’t be used to it, so I knew there were things that could be done. About two weeks after that incident, I just remember hearing a scream. I got out of my room and I immediately saw her run and slam the door shut into the bathroom, she locked herself in. And then I see my dad come, he’s pounding on the door, he’s screaming “Get out of the room or I’ll hit you harder.” And I’m just like “What happened?” So she opens the door and I just remember this part where I just step in front of her and I’m just like “Don’t you dare hit her” and he’s like “Move or I’ll hit you too” and I was just like “Go ahead.” I remember just feeling so much hatred and such anger that I was just really ready to kill him. I was ready to murder him

if need be. I was a very angry person and he raised his hand and really looked like he was going to hit me and I guess he realized that.. around this time I was almost his height he's like 6 ft 1 or 6 ft 2 and I was around the same height I am now and I guess he realized that...

L - That you also had quite a look in your eye.

H - I remember my mom...I never blamed her but she just never knew how to stop it. She loved him and she believes in the man always being the head of the house; you have to obey. So she never really...I never blamed her for that but I remember her stepping back when she saw my face. And he just looks at me and then he lowers his hand and turns around, goes to his room and slams his door. And I don't see him for the rest of the day but that was the last time he ever hurt them. I think he realized that I was old enough to hit back or do worse. I'm just like "this is not ok and if you think it is, I'm going to kick your ass," so that was that.

We lived in that apartment for 10 years and then dad again goes in and out of jobs, in and out of jobs. My mom was the only one who held a steady job because she finally started working because she was terrified of leaving us alone at home. She was like "I'm not having a stranger raise you guys; I don't trust anybody." Immigrants have they have their own little thing like, "Why would I trust another person with my child?" I don't know what they could do to you. She was a house mom for the longest time and when we moved to Minnesota, about a year, after she started working at Sam's Club as a decorator. She's a cake decorator; she's really good at it she used to do that for years and years. My dad moved to Florida to try and find another job and then about a year after when he was there, because he was staying with her brother, because he of course didn't have a place to stay. _____ He was working trying to collect money and my mom

moved over there, so at this time my sister and I were in college. We would visit our parents in Florida and stay there for the holidays but it was only for a year, because then they moved to California, because he lost his job again. And unfortunately to the place where they moved in California, there wasn't a Sam's Club, so my mom was now out of work. So they're both unemployed and by this time, I think my dad had reached about a year of unemployment. He was literally living off my uncle. So they moved to my mother's parents' house and they stayed there. And of course we had to come over there in the summer because we didn't have a place to stay. It's like, ok, if my parents don't have a place to stay, we don't have a place to stay after school is over because my baby sister started college last year and we're all in St. Kate's. So this past summer, we spent it with our grandparents and there was a lot of tension, a lot of stress, my gosh. There was even an outbreak where my dad and I got into a fight sort of, he punched me... I mean it was just bad. So we came back here and I thought everything was going to be normal. _____ I feel like my life is normal when I'm in school because everything makes sense. I'm independent, I don't feel different, too different, but whenever I'm with my parents it just hits you just how different it really is. You look around you and it's like all these people are living a nice life and they don't realize that reality isn't reality. I get a call from my mom the beginning of October or the end of September... it was the middle of September and she calls me and she's just like "Your dad found a job as a truck driver." She's all excited, the problem is he needs to be driving for six months across the country so he will drive for three weeks and have three days off and then drive three weeks and have three days off. _____ My grandparents were moving with my aunt because they were getting a house together, so my mom didn't want to stay there. My mother and her sister don't get along and the whole time had been horrible for her, she's just like I need a place to stay. So I tried to ask the school if it was ok if my mom could

stay with us because we have a two bedroom apartment here on campus. We paid for an extra space it's easier if it's just the three of us because we don't fight with each other. We're used to living with each other so she's kind of illegally living with us right now until we can find a better situation for her.

L - But you have a two bedroom apartment and four of you.

H - We think it's fine just as long as school doesn't find out cause they're going to get.... You know...Right now I'm trying to work with CLUES to get her a job and to try...

L - They're good.

H - I've heard that, so I'm working with one of the people there and I'm planning to do applications with Ramsey County tomorrow to try and get her Medicare and the Medicaid stuff. [I'm] just trying to figure this all out because I'm somehow turning into a parent for my parent. I don't know how else to explain it. My dad...you know how with Hispanic families, the hierarchy the dad takes care of everything. He does everything so the woman doesn't know what to do because she's never had to do it. So I somehow became the man of the house. I'm the parent now.

L - You are the person who can see what needs doing and figure out...

H - If she ever needs anything, she asks me “oh, can you do this?” “How do you do this?” she will literally have me do it because she doesn’t know how. We’ve been trying to teach her how to use a computer. It’s one of those ummm I’m kind of feeling a little stressed right now because I’m trying to figure all this out because in the end, we need a place to stay in the summer. So I’d rather find her housing and something stable now, so I don’t have to worry about it later.

L - Yeah. In terms of housing insecurity it’s kind of been chronic.

H – Yeah, we never had a stable place.

L - You were in Plymouth for quite a while.

H - That was the longest, I felt a connection there, because that was the longest we ever stayed anywhere. So it’s like, oh ok, I feel like this is kind of a home, but then we moved.

L - In this time who do you feel like you could rely on?

H - I think it’s kind of back to childhood honestly I’ve never learned how to rely on anybody. Whenever I feel too stressed I just read a book [and] just take care of it myself. I’ve never been taught how to ask for help or how to lean on somebody else because I’ve never had anyone to lean on. I’m not sure if that makes any sense.

L - Yeah. I think that part of how you cope is not relying on people, especially as a kid, you're getting a lot of messages that people weren't necessarily reliable.

H - I don't want to make my mom sound like a bad mom; she was a great mom, [and] she taught me everything about who I am today, she taught me all my values. She loved us even if she wasn't affectionate, she loved us and we could feel it. I felt that because she couldn't handle the situation we were in, she couldn't remove what was hurting us, that I couldn't rely on her and I still feel like that. I feel like she isn't.... I don't want to say she isn't strong enough but I feel like she lacks what I need to rely on her.

L - And you know that as much as she loves you, she couldn't protect you and she couldn't protect herself and I think that doesn't change how much she loves you and how much she has been a caring parent.

H - I think also for immigrants, it's harder to navigate in this society and the bureaucracy and the paperwork but also just some of the norms that exist here. We're in a different situation and you realized hey, not everyone grows up with things like this and that's a lot to deal with.

L - And the fact that you and your sisters have all been able to get yourself here, it's a huge achievement. In terms of your educational journey, books have been a refuge and school in general. You've been a good student?

H - I would like to say yes. It really depends on my family situation, like, how we're doing. If we're doing well, I'm doing well in school; if we're not doing well I'm not doing well in school.

L - That makes a lot of sense.

H - Last semester I got straight A's but the semester prior I think 1 F, 1 D and a couple Cs it's kind of like a repeating cycle. I feel like in the fall, it gets bad for some reason and in the spring, it's better and in the fall, gets worse I don't really have a stable environment to help me cope.

L - To have that foundation, to just focus on studies. In terms of St. Kate's, how have you found it here?

H - I like it. I used to go to Gustavus and I found it to be very cold community, I guess you could say. I liked a lot of the international students, a lot of the minority organizations out there that try to teach about different cultures to different people but it was literally white noise. Nobody paid attention. There was so much apathy on campus and the little community there, the St. Peter community is very racist. For a lack of a better term, they are very... I shouldn't try to insult them but for example, my sister and her Hmong friend went grocery shopping one day. And she doesn't look like me, she's not pale. Both my sisters are shorter and darker skinned. They have lovely complexions. Anyway my sister and her friend were followed from aisle to aisle where people were pointing at them and staring and it's like "Have you never seen a minority that you have to be...?" You can see confederate flags on peoples' porches. I didn't like that environment so I came here; this was my second choice. I tend to be uncomfortable with guys, I tend to be

most comfortable with women because I feel like all of us go through a similar journey, we all get our periods, we all get emotional, and maybe, we'll all have babies someday...

L - I think St. Kate's students try to be supportive of each other. I don't know that it always works that way but I think that and that partly a single sex environment makes it more...

H - It's comfortable, I like the atmosphere, very relaxed but at the same time focused. It's a better fit for me.

L – Well, that's nice to hear. So you're studying social work and how far are you in your...?

H - I'm a junior.

L - A junior, that's pretty great. In terms of...I'm sure with your class work in social work [that] issues of poverty and homelessness, some of these kinds of social concerns, come up. How sensitive do you think your classmates, your professors that you've dealt with are?

H - I want to say they are open to the idea but they are very ignorant of it. A lot of them, I hate to say that the stereotype is true, but especially St. Thomas students, they are privileged and they don't know the concept of poverty and what it means. I until recently didn't know that homelessness meant that you didn't have your own home, it [can mean] that you were staying at someone else's home. I didn't know that it was actually a form of homelessness, but I learned about the different forms of homelessness. And I'm like, "Oh I guess I have been homeless I just

didn't know it." It's just one of those things, but people won't even grasp the idea because there are a lot of people who say "I want to help, I want to help." But they don't understand that poverty and homelessness isn't that one picture of some drunken old guy on the street who is just trying to get money for drugs or whatever. No, it can be the person you walk next to or sit next to in class who can just say the coolest things to you and you're thinking this person is normal, you don't think this person might be experiencing homelessness or poverty because they seem normal to you. But that's it, you can't just say that person is homeless just by looking at them. It's not a single picture, it's not.

L - I think just the level of awareness is so variable.

H - Mmmhmm. You will hear such ignorant comments too in class where you're just like, really? I heard from a friend of mine that in one of her classes, a classmate was talking about how she thought we shouldn't be giving so much social help. Like the social welfare system shouldn't be giving so much help because it gets abused and people are taking advantage of the system. And I understand that it's true to some extent, because my mother being that she has been through the system before, has seen people who will literally tell her how to abuse it. But there are tons and tons and tons of people who really do need that help and aren't getting it.

L - I think again it's partly being resourceful and the system is set up with weird incentives sometimes too but for someone who has never tried to access that, their ability to comprehend that can be limited.

H - When she told me who it was... I kind of know her... she scares me. I feel like she's really privileged and she likes to try to correct professors because she feels like she's right. ____ She has that personality and the only thing that makes me happy is that the fact that she is not a social work major but a psych major. And even that kind of scares me because I'm thinking "oh my gosh you're going to be helping people with that kind of mentality?" With that "Oh I'm right; you're wrong; I'm the expert of your life, I know everything about you and I will tell you how things should be," that's not very... I just feel like she's not sensitive enough for the field that she's going into. She's really just the "B" word, let's just put it that way.

L - I think you have reason to know what it's like to be treated by people who really are insensitive and think they know better and that doesn't really help a lot.

H - It's like ahhh no one's going to want to talk to you and open themselves up, and try to get help from you, if you're going to treat them like there is something Do you know what I'm trying to say?

L - Oh yeah.

H - Like if you're trying to take away the dignity of who they are, it's just unreal.

L - I think that part of the lack of awareness, especially by privileged people, is that things are set up, [so] that if you don't want to see poverty, it's pretty easy to avert your eyes and to not take that in. ____ I think there is a lot of denial where people like to think, "oh they must have done

something and it could never happen to me,” is sort of what a lot of people try to comfort themselves with.

H - I know; it really is a problem. There is the American dream: if you work hard you will be prosperous, but that’s fictional. If the system is broken, if the system is not allowing you to get to that point, well then you can’t do anything. My dad worked 14 hour days and he still couldn’t get to the point where he wasn’t poor. It’s fictional.

L - That reality is why the system is...

H - That’s why people blame poor people...it’s like, “Oh no, they’re lazy.”

L - Right and that’s not really helping anything and there are plenty of lazy privileged people too. What do you wish some of your classmates, some of your professors, some of the staff you’ve worked with, what do you wish they knew?

H - I think, I’m not sure if this is me being naive but I wish that people understood that everyone is a human being and even if they can’t understand what poverty is and even if they can’t even fathom what it’s like to miss a meal, or any of that. They’re still human beings. They cry like you do. They laugh like you do. And they will bleed like you do. So even if you don’t think it will happen to you one day, you should still reach out as a human being to another human being and be like even though I can never sympathize and understand, I can still try to respect you as who you are instead of trying to put you down for something I can’t understand.

L - And just to see the full humanity and the dignity.

H - I just feel people forget that we're all human and they're just so used to trying to shove everyone in categories and differentiate everybody but it's like, in the end, we are all human beings. And the more you try to put up differences, the more conflict, the more hatred is created. All these horrible systems that are against other people just pop up.

L - It reinforces division. As you look ahead in a year and half, you will graduate with your BS or BA in social work, what are your plans, hopes, dreams?

H - I want to get my masters right after and I want to be a clinical social worker for the Air Force just because I feel there are a lot of problems that are being ignored right now in the military. For some reason domestic violence has been cropping up more. _____I don't know if it's been cropping up more because more attention is being paid onto it or because of some other factor. I feel sometimes people tend to ignore things and then suddenly when they pay attention things spike up. And it's like no, you just haven't realized, it's been there all along. I feel like there are not enough resources in and out of research or enough attention that goes into what is really going on there because these men face such stressful situations it's just like...Let's try to help out these families that clearly think that this is not supposed to be happening but it is and on the side. I would also like to be a volunteer for schools. I know there are a lot of children that go through the same thing I went through, because I had a horrible period where I just didn't want to be in school because I just saw my dad working so hard. And I felt like why am I in school

when I could probably get a job right now and try to get my family more money, like, why am I here? It's really frustrating and I understand that for a lot of students, it's hard for them not wanting to drop out. And staying in class when you have that family situation in the back, you're just like I could be doing something and here I am in the classroom. You don't understand the point of school or books, you just think it's pointless. I want to go as a social worker there and help them out when I'm not doing my job. If I volunteer there, I feel like it would be really cool and helpful.

L - And kids know when someone is giving them of line of bull or when someone is there for them and real and that can make a difference. I wanted to ask – Do you think, well first gender, do you think that sort of shaped your experiences with housing insecurity and if so how?

H - Gender? Like...

L - Like being female. Do you think that there are things you can look at your experience and you feel like as a woman, it's kind of been a certain way that it might be different if you were male and I don't know...you've never been male, so you have no idea...but also if you think that being Latina or...

H - Are you asking me if there are any disadvantages to or advantages?

L - Just part of how you understand your situation, does it seem like it's a particularly female kind of story?

H - I always just assume that the reason we were in our situation is because my parents are immigrants and not knowing the language of the country first off. Trying to learn a new system, trying to learn new rules, trying to figure out resources, trying to figure out who you can talk to and who you can't talk to. My mom...they don't accept different degrees from different countries, so it was just like oh, I have to get a GED here, what? So it's just one of those, I feel like my story would fit more into the immigrant category. I don't feel like it's gender maybe because I tend to be very forward and I just don't think gender should be a reason to feel like you're a victim or just helpless because you can do just as much as a man, can so I guess because I always grew up kind of the like the man of the house. I always have that weird gender role in a Hispanic family: I'm not exactly a girl but I'm not a boy, I'm just like that person people rely on.

L - You're someone who is strong and maybe that wasn't considered such a girl thing.

H – No, it's definitely not a girly thing, well not in a Hispanic family. I took more of a boy role. I feel like I'm a girl, I like girly things, I like nail polish. I do girly things but I also like doing guy things like building things. I like using my hands and I feel like gender is a social concept so you can be whoever you want to be, you can do whatever you want to do.

L - I think young women of your generation are so much cooler and less encumbered by some of the baggage that those who came before you carried, I think that's hopeful. Is there something that if you were in a position to be interviewing yourself or someone else for this project, is there a question that you think why isn't she asking this?

H - I don't know, you've covered a lot of bases.

L - You don't have to come up with anything but I feel like, this is your story, this is your chance to get it out and I just want to make sure it's not my not knowing to go somewhere that would prevent you from sharing some piece of it that you feel like this is really important and you're not giving me a chance.

H - Well when I signed up for this, I came in it with the idea that giving out a story and by letting people know, "Hey I'm normal. I'm that girl that you probably would see on the street that isn't living on the street and she will probably shop at the same grocery store you do, or will probably be sitting next to you in class, will be just like you with a different income. A different story just the same. I want to...I guess I came in trying to dispel the idea of the "us vs. them" concept. It's not us vs. them. It's just us...we just happen to have a different story.

L - You know that exact concept is how I got here doing these interviews is realizing that we're not talking about those other people. We're talking about St. Kate's and we're talking about us, and we need to listen and understand. Anything else you want to say?

H - I don't know, I kind of wish our system was different I just feel like everyone in the world has forgotten that we got here as human beings, because we used to look out for each other, we used to try to take care of each other as a species. And now, all we're doing is trying to get ahead of each other and trying to push other people down to get ourselves up; everyone out for

themselves and it would be nice if people remember that above all, everyone just wants to be accepted.

L - And that every person deserves their dignity to be honored and respected and to have a roof over your head and sufficient food. I hope by you telling your story, that this is one more contribution to helping end homelessness and let other people know.