

6-2013

Sirena

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Recommended Citation

"Sirena" (2013). *Oral Histories*. Book 7.
http://sophia.stkate.edu/scuvoh_audio/7

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06/11/2013

Sirena's Interview

St. Catherine University

L - When and where were you born?

S - I was born in St. Paul Minnesota, _____, 1978.

L - Describe your family situation, your household as you were growing up, who was in it?

S - I grew up mostly with my mom and my five siblings. So, it was my older brother, myself, my younger sister and my three younger brothers. It was mostly just us. And my dad, he was in and out of jail and prison so I don't really have a lot of memories of him as being around a lot. For the most part it was only us. When I was really young we did live in Mexico for five or six years. We lived in a town called Matamoros, Mexico; it was a very poor town... it's like a warehouse town where they, it's like a kickback town from all the industrial sites you know, like a shanty town maybe. At that point we lived with my grandmother on my father's side, so it was us, my mom and my siblings and I, and then in the same house which was like a 1 bedroom or 2 bedroom house, we had myself, my mother, my three siblings at the time and we had my two uncles, my aunt and my father, however many that is- all living in this 1 or 2 bedroom house. And we didn't have indoor plumbing, flushing toilet; we had an outdoor outhouse that we had to go to take our shower, it was a little shower stall; kind of like park bathrooms except gross, way gross. It was a little shower and little separate toilets which was mostly like a hole, you go to the bathroom and you would take your bucket of water that you got and you would dump it in the hole, that's like flushing the toilet.

L - Right – old school.

S - Right old school. Then we would take our clothes to the river and we would wash our clothes in the river and hang them up to dry. And my grandmother's kitchen, wasn't really like a kitchen it was like a hot plate in this room that was the kitchen. So it was very small, now I would describe it as a shack but it was with all these people and all these make-shift areas for rooms, that was when I was smaller. When I was about 7 we came back to the United states. We lived in Texas for a while when I was 6 and when I was 7, we came back to Minnesota.

L - That was with your mom and your siblings?

S - Yes with my mom and by then, there were five siblings. In the process of us going down there it was my mom and my older brother my sister and I. And then we came back with two more brothers. She went down with three and came back up with five and it wasn't until much later that my youngest brother was born.

L - So you were the second oldest?

S - Yes I'm second oldest.

L - The oldest girl.

S - Yes, second oldest, oldest girl, in charge of all the kids. I always remember being in Mexico and the poverty that we experienced there. I always remember it being my mom and all the kids, we've always been together.

L - And that's what home was, was being all together.

S - Yep, yep because we had some pretty lousy places that we lived. When we were in Texas, we lived in a studio apartment. So it was my mom, my dad and the five kids at that time, living in a studio apartment. I remember that my brother had his dresser in the bathroom, so whenever he had to get ready to go somewhere, you had to get out of the bathroom because that's where his clothes were. In that apartment we didn't have a stove either; we had a hotplate so my mom would cook whatever, like make miracles on the hotplate.

L - I was going to say, could she put together dinner?

S - Yeah, she would put together dinner; she would get food from the food shelf and put together dinner. And for clothes, my sister and I would dig in the dumpster to get whatever clothes or whatever we needed. And for food, I always remember getting commodities like the cans of beef and the blocks of cheese. We always had that and we always had a little bit at a time because I don't remember there being a big refrigerator.

L - So you could not store or keep a lot of stuff.

S - There was not a full size fridge that you could keep your big frozen things and canned goods, I don't remember having a lot of food or a lot of space to store that and I don't remember having leftovers that you could have because there was nowhere to put them.

L - Large family too.

S - Yeah that was kind of the American side of poverty, where it's like you weren't living in a shack and your toilet flushed and there was like six people living in a studio apartment with one bed and then the kids slept on the floor with the roaches and the mice and whatever else was on the floor with you.

L - It's not that one is better than the other....

S - It's just different but I remember the first time I heard a toilet flush, it scared the hell out of me I was like "what was that?!" but now it's something that sticks with me all the time. Something as stupid as flushing the toilet, you're like oh, just flush the toilet. And thank God the toilet flushes!

L - Cause when it doesn't [you've] got to have your bucket of water.

S - Exactly. And sometimes like somebody I knew, their toilet broke and I'm like just get a bucket of water and it was foreign to them.

L - Like that would flush it?

S - That that would flush the toilet and it was like “what” but to me it was something so natural and just something like washing your shirt in your sink

L - You know how to do that, that will work. It may not be your first choice but it works.

S - That was kind of my childhood early on.

L - So by 7 you are back in St. Paul and have you pretty much stayed in St. Paul since then?

S - Yeah, I pretty much stayed here. My mom is born a west-sider, so she was born here on the west side and so our family, my maternal family, has always been here, so we’ve always been here.

L - You had close relatives and just that community.

S - Yeah our community, has always been the west side and that kind of I guess has been our focal point here and make a life here. So we’ve always been here. I’d go down to Texas once a year or something to visit family but for me going back to Brownsville or going back to Mexico – like I don’t think.. even though they aren’t as poor as they used to be, I’m so used to being here.

L - It's really a different world. So, I got this question, when did you first experience housing insecurity? It sounds like there was some in your childhood.

S - Yeah, in the early part of my childhood like when we left Mexico, I don't remember being like are we going to be homeless or whatever, but when we were coming back. We were leaving Texas and we were coming back on the Greyhound and I remember feeling like "Where are we going now? What is our life going to be like now?" And so that was the first couple times that were memorable.

L - That things were up in the air or that you didn't know?

S - Yeah, that I didn't know what was going on.

L - With the different moves, were there particular other events that triggered that need to go to Mexico come back, go to Texas, come back?

S - No and that... Are you talking about in childhood or in adulthood?

L - Yeah I guess in childhood that you can sort of point to – oh ok this is what was going on?

S - Well, the first time we went to Mexico I think because my mom was first married to my dad when we were little. So I think we went down there to kind of live down there but I'm not really sur, but then I knew we came back because he was really abusive. And he had problems with

drugs and alcohol so he's constantly in and out of jail. So my mom just decided, he went to prison for the "last time" and my mom just decided I'm going home. I'm taking my kids and going home. She called up one of my uncles and she said I want to come home, he sent her the money to pack all her little stuff on Greyhound which there wasn't that much stuff.

L - Yeah but 5 little kids, wow.

S - And we all came back.

L - And you were her first, right hand.

S - Yeah, from the really very beginning, I was like the right hand man. Even with all the disabilities and things that I had and the different schooling that I went to, I was always the right hand man. She would have this thing cause the kids couldn't spell yet and so she would be like "I'm G-O- ing to the store" and my brother would be like "G-O-ing?", my older brother, and I would be like she's going to the store dude! He was like "oh yeah, I knew that. I would have caught that" or she would spell it out like there is C-A-N-D-Y in the... So I was always helping her do stuff.

L - She was a single mom.

S - And she could always count on me. And still to this day always, sometimes it takes a stick to get it out of her but, she's always like oh, I need 20 bucks for .. and I'm always there to be like

here, whatever I have I can help you, give it to... its always been that kind of relationship where I'm always the helper or the other parent. She's always been a single parent, I've always been the back-up.

As a kid you're like "ah leave me alone" but then you get used to it. And so now, since my brother has been gone I think 14, years I've just kind of fallen into that role of being the back-up.. or being the oldest I guess.

L - You stepped up. Where did your brother go?

S - He died of heart disease. It was undiagnosed heart disease. When he was younger than I am now, about 30, he went to sleep and he didn't wake up. [] So they don't know if it was ever diagnosed or it was a congenital thing because back in 1969, there wasn't science like there is now. So he's been gone about 14 years come July.

L - And how old were you at that point?

S - About 21, old enough to know but young enough to be like, I just started life, I didn't know half as much as what I do now.

L - Back in St. Paul, did your mom have a job or a source of income?

S - She did, she had a few different jobs. She worked for a restaurant as a cook at one point, when we were little. And then she worked at the post office at Christmas time and she sold

tamales and tortillas and tacos and whatever else she could cook, she sold it on the side during Christmas time, or she would sign up for the church fairs and make tacos. And she had a taco truck at one time with, I think, one of my uncles, they did a taco truck. So she always had a way to make money. Whether it was making food or whatever, she always had a way to make money and she still does. She just made tamales the other day and selling them. She always had a way of making extra money.

L - And whether she was.. it sounds like she could deal with whatever she needed to.

S - She's good about knowing the resources, like if there is a food shelf or a Salvation Army or something like we took advantage of the soup kitchen a lot down at Neighborhood House and so we always joke and say you're not a really west sider unless you ate at _____ or at the neighborhood house at least 3 times a week, because we all did. On the west side at that time was ... there was not really color, there was just everybody is poor, so we didn't really look at each other like he's black, he's white, he's Asian or whatever. It's like we're all hungry and we all need to do what we need to do to feed each other.

L - This is where we can get some...

S - This is where we can get some food and if we know someone who is hungry, we'll tell them. Or if my mom was cooking dinner and one our friends was like I haven't eaten yet or like hey, come in and eat with us. We're just as poor as you.

L - And when you have a little extra, you can help out and you'll know they will be there for you.

S - So, it was a lot of that and sharing and stuff. I think too when you have five kids, who's going to be your daycare? We would have neighbors sometimes that would babysit but when you can't find a babysitter it's hard to keep a job and you...

L - For single parents, it's really a juggling act.

S - There were times when I was older that she had two jobs at one time, because I was older and I could watch the kids but when I was young it was hard for her to keep a job.

L - Was five the total?

S - There were six but my youngest brother didn't come along until I was almost 13. So he was like the baby-baby.

L - So tell me, what it was like for you living in those grade school years?

S - I always tell people I wouldn't go back to childhood if you paid me. I had a shitty childhood. I had one of the hardest things was for me ever in life to be a child because not only did I deal with this _____ at any minute, any moment we could not have enough money to pay rent or electricity or have food. Then with _____, there was a point where for a lot of years, my

mom was an alcoholic so for dealing with that, and helping her go through that, I wouldn't go back to that for anything.

L - And you were a child. It was not a world of your making.

S - Exactly, yeah and I had no control. When you're a child and you have all these things you can't walk away from it, it's just there.

L - How did you cope?

S - I read a lot. I read a lot of books, I wrote a lot of stories. I wrote stories about everything that was going on around me. I would write funny stories about my mom and her friends, they would get ready to go out, and the things that these people would do to fit into clothes that were too small for them.. like you would never do that, so I wrote about that or things that... or stories that they would tell me about when they were little and I wrote about that and the things that.. the way that my mom would entertain us, like the games she used to play. When my mom was younger, you would never think about it now because she has arthritis and stuff, but when she was younger, she could run and jump and she would chase you around like the mummy from Scooby-Doo and she would put us in a sleeping bag and we had these stairs and she would sit on the sleeping bag with us and we would go down the stairs and probably somebody could call child protection for that because it's probably child endangerment, but also it was fun.

L - It was fun, sounds like she could play.

S - She could play. She's always been that way. She's really playful and she has a great sense of humor and stuff so I would write about that. Because I was disabled, I couldn't play sports or anything.

L - Could you tell me a little more about your disability if you want to?

S - Yeah. I skimmed over it because it's not really pronounced.

L - No, but obviously this was something that was important as you were growing up.

S - I have a lot of disabilities because I was born about 3 months premature so I have this long list of disabilities. So as a child, they were all kind of right there in your face. I had braces on both legs, I big thick glasses, I had a patch over one eye, I had caps on all my teeth, what else was wrong with me? I had crossed eyes for a while and I eventually got those surgically fixed. And I have the biggest thing, that is the most pronounced is I have a weird gait in my walk because I have partial paralysis on my left side because I have just a little bit of Cerebral Palsy and I think one of my legs is shorter than the other or something. So that's the most pronounced that everybody says, "oh, you walk funny" or whatever, they just assume I got hit by a car or something. But as a child they were all kind of at the forefront.

L - And you're growing.

S - I was growing and I had these big thick white braces on my legs and these big thick glasses and I had these gigantic silver teeth and the patch.

L - It was a lot.

S - It was a lot and I always think to my mom like “how could you love me? – look at me” I was like Frankenstein, the kid.

L - There is the saying you know, “only a mother can love”

S - That was me.

L - Mothers, they see your beauty.

S - Because of all that there is, that glass cup syndrome, they treat you like you can't run and jump. So my mom would never let me play sports, not that I'm coordinated or anything because sometimes I just fall for no reason. But I wasn't allowed to do a lot of kid things, so I read a lot and I wrote a lot of stories and I wrote a lot of poems and I dove into school.

L - Tell me about your schools?

S - I started going to school when I was 3 months old. I went to Como it was a school for handicapped children so I started school there at a very early age just getting motor skills, getting

coordination skills, getting physical therapy, occupational therapy because they originally had told my mom that I would be blind and deaf and be basically a vegetable and she was like “that’s not happening.” So I went to school and I got all this intense training.

L - That is so important.

S - So I started out there and I went to Kindergarten I think in Texas, which I don’t really remember and then I started first grade here in St. Paul. I started at Riverview on the Westside and I just came up in the normal school system but being 1 of only 2 or 3 disabled kids.

L - Were you segregated by the schools?

S - No. They throw you right in there. You need to learn to adapt. Once they figure out you’re Hispanic but you can speak English, they throw you right in there. That was the biggest hurdle, “Oh she doesn’t speak English but you do.” They threw me right in there and basically when you’re disabled and there are only 2 other kids that are disabled you learn how to fight really fast.

L - Who were you fighting?

S - Just other kids that would pick on you.

L - Bullies?

S - Yeah, bullies and because you are different they are just cruel. [] Learning to cope with that and developing the thick skin and just telling yourself that one day, I'm gonna own your ass. I'm going to be so much better than you and having an older brother help, having an older brother to walk you to the bus stop with a baseball bat; that helps. You have to develop your sense of humor and your defense mechanism and your ability to read a person and be like what is it that you really want.

L - And survival skills.

S - And survival skills yeah. And apparently I was meaner in my younger age, I never noticed it but apparently yes, I was mean.

L - You needed a little distance.

S - Armor. Cause otherwise I don't think I would have made it.

L - As you're growing up on the Westside are you staying pretty much in the same place or are you moving around?

S - We moved, we used to live on George Street, we rented a house from one of my uncles for a little while, like a year or so, when we first came back. And then we rented a bigger house on the

same street for a couple years and then we moved into the Torre De San Miguel, they are the projects on the West Side, we lived there for about 6 or 7 years.

L - How was that?

S - It was ok.

L - Did you have a little more space?

S - We had a little more space but we were still poor. That is where we had a sense of the poor community because everyone is around the same income as you, so that's where we really got the taste of being a Westsider. And not seeing each other's color but seeing that this so-and-so doesn't have shoes; I know a place where you can get shoes. Or so-and-so their mom doesn't take care of them, so my mom is gonna take care of you. We didn't have enough clothes so hey let's figure out a way we're gonna go steal some clothes or just getting by.

L - Taking care of what needed doing. Looking out for each other.

S - Looking out for each other. Even the kids would look out for the grown-ups, like so-and-so they drink a lot and they fall asleep outside on the merry-go-round, so we're going to drag them home, so we did that. But it was just looking out for each other and as kids trying to make the best of the situation and families trying to help each other out.

L - What about social services or those kinds of things were they apart of it?

S - No because for you to be involved with any kind of social worker was like forbidden. I remember I had a big brother/brother sister and that was forbidden because there was a fear that someone is going to see that I'm poor and they're going to think I can't support my kids or I can't take care of my kids and my kids are going to get taken away.

L - Ok. You wanted to protect who saw what.

S - So it was like there is no big brother/big sister, there is nobody from the outside coming in because we're trying to protect our kids. Especially if they were white, Caucasian or whatever, you're not bringing a white person into this environment because at that time, there were no poor white people and if there were...

L - They weren't in your neighborhood.

S - Well if they were, we didn't consider them white because they were just like us. It took me until I was about 16 or 17 to realize...no probably like 19, to realize that my Auntie Bergie was black because I never saw her as black she was just my Auntie Bergie. And she worked at the school, she worked in the cafeteria. I never knew she was black and then someone told me Auntie Bergie is black and I was like "Auntie Bergie are you black?" and she laughed and she said "girl I've been black all my life" and I was like I never knew that. I never looked at her as

black because she was just... And my Auntie Sheila too, she's white and I never saw her as white...

L - She was who she was and that was a part of your world.

S - But if they were a social worker or whatever, it was forbidden and they were kept out.

L - What do you think about that now?

S - I think on the tad wrong side because there were people that really did need help, but I think that if you're coming from the place of "I love my kids and I'm doing the best that I can."

L - And that you know people who have had kids taken away.

S - Exactly. Or maybe even a bad experience with a social worker, it skews your vision of what social workers can do, but at that time, it was forbidden. There were no social workers, nobody was allowed inside even if they were trying to do good, it was not viewed as that.

L - And kind of just pride. That is just part of what I'm hearing, is that "we don't want to show the world what we're struggling with."

S - It's like "we don't need anybody to know our business. We're getting along just fine and we help each other here."

L - Right and that's how we get by..

S - Yeah

L - In terms of, we sort of talked about ethnicity.. What about being a.. You're not an immigrant but your father is. Do you feel like that was part of what was really shaping your experience?

S - Yeah I think it did because only my father and one of my aunts are actually citizens, only because my grandma was snuck across the border to have them, but the rest of my uncles and aunts they are not, they had be legalized in different ways. So I really relate to the Chicano side, the side that is here, that was born here and is of Hispanic origin, but then again, there is a part of me that is always tied to the immigrant experience because I do have family that still struggles with that.

L - And you have memories.

S - And I have memories of living in that country and trying to come across the border and them looking at me like I was less than what an American citizen should be because I'm coming across the border from Matamoros, Mexico and I just happened to be brown or whatever. I remember my mom saying "My kids are citizens; my kids were born in the United States." There used to be doctors who would come across the border and they would give the kids shots. They were supposed to be vaccinations and my mom is like "No, you're not touching my kids, you

ain't giving my kids them shots." My mom is very colorful and I remember her saying "I don't know what's in that shit, you're not giving that shit to my kids" and the other moms are like "Why don't you have your kid?... and she's like "No, I take my kids to a regular doctor. My kids are citizens, we are free to go across the border and even though we had that freedom, we were still being viewed as being, because we lived there, we were still immigrants.

L - Profiling.

S - And even now, I say that I lived in Matamoros, Mexico and people will say "Are you a citizen?" and I'm like "Well yeah, I've always been a citizen," but I still identify with my other relatives that are restricted still from coming across the border and are still considered immigrants. There is still a big part of me that still identifies with that or the profiling of immigrants or things. There is a very big part when you've experience that it would all stay with you because you have people who you care about who have to deal with that.

L - Well and this.. I don't want to take you off course, but I mean, part of it is the way people talk about immigrants in the public realm, that Mexican Americans are often called illegals and that just is.... that there are some people who that's what they see.

S - And that's all they see.

L - And it can be distorted, it can be just plain wrong but I think language is powerful and I think that is a way of discounting people. So you went through high school and graduated high school in St. Paul?

S - I graduated high school from Humboldt Senior High in St. Paul so right on the Westside.

L - What kind of student were you?

S - Eh, I was a good student, I wasn't the best just because I think there was so much going on at home. I had five kids to take care of and helping my mom around the house and like I said, my youngest brother was born when I was 12 and so all of the sudden, I had a baby to take care of. She brought him home and was like – “Here I brought you something,” and I'm thinking she brought me like a cheeseburger or something.. a cheeseburger was like the ultimate thing you could bring somebody. No, she hands me this little hairy baby in this car seat; he's been mine ever since. I basically raised him.

L - It was like you were a teen mom.

S - Yeah I was a teen mom and before school, I would get him up and feed him, put his clothes on and then go to school. Then I would get home and I would play with him or whatever until he went to bed and then I would do homework. I used to sit at school and do homework in the lunchroom before I went home because once when you got home, you weren't doing it.. there was kids and all that. I was okay, I got A's, B's, C's and D's and whatever but it was such a

rough time during the schooling years because my mom still drank and I had to deal with the kids and I had to try and go to school. In my area that I'm.. I don't want to say in my culture.. but where I'm from, you don't go to college. It's not the thing that you do.

L - It was not an expectation.

S - Yeah, that's not an expectation. You graduate from high school maybe and you get a job and you help your family. And by this time, we had moved out of the projects, so we were renting a house and so we got to be our little family and be in our little environment which was better, but it was not an expectation of me to go to college.

L - And even though you were clearly a kid who was smart and read and wrote and all of that, it was for other people.

S - It was for people that had money. College was meant for people who had money and I think there were people that didn't even expect me to go to college because my mom has always been the black sheep. So even though we were good kids, we were always expected to screw it up somehow so it wasn't expected of me to do anything. Maybe I'd get pregnant and drop out of school, or maybe I'd get pregnant and have a couple kids and work a job, but never to go to college. The idea was brought up and maybe but they didn't groom you for it or encourage it.

L - And telling you – “ok, this Saturday you have to get up early and take your test” and all of those things.

S - Yeah it was like, anything that you were going to do, you had to do it on your own and have your own plan. I did have a couple of counselors that were like you can do this, you can go to college. But like I say, where I come from, you don't go to college and I think I had that for so many years engrained in my head that I just kind of put it off.

L - So when you graduated from high school, you were still living at home?

S - I was still living at home, it became so rough for me for a couple years that as soon as I turned 20 I got out. I got a job and I got my own place and tried to make it as best I could and still...

L - Just to be independent.

S - Yeah and still try and raise my brother and help my mom.

L - So did he come with you?

S - Mmhmm. He came with me for a little bit and then he decided he wanted to be with his brothers so he moved back to my mom but he did come with me for a little bit and he spends a lot of time back and forth between my place and my mom's.

L - But it gave you a little independence.

S - Yeah, a little independence. It was kind of a new thing for me not to have anyone to take care of for a little bit, but he's always been like right there with me so...

L - So where were you working?

S - I worked at a telemarketing company, as a telemarketer. I'm not good at sales, I don't like sales but I worked there and I worked at a nursing home for a little while and then I ended up losing my job so I ended up having to move back home, and then find another job and move back on my own.

L - How old were you at that point?

S - I was 20 and I turned 21 and after my brother died, I lost my job and I moved back home. I was only there for about six months and I got another full time job and I moved out and was on my own.

L - Still on the Westside?

S - Still on the Westside, Yeah.

L - And you acquired a husband at some point?

S - I didn't actually get married until I was older, I was about 27 when I got married. That is a weird relationship for me. That was when I really experienced the ups and downs and the possibility of being homeless, it really came crashing down on me. My husband, shortly after we were married, he was deployed to Iraq. He spent about 9 months in country, but when he came back, he did not come back the same person. He came back and he was very angry, he had a lot of anger. He had a lot of nervousness not to the point that you would call it anxiety, just jumpy, just different. You know how when you're with somebody you know them and when they change you know something is different? So he came back and he had a lot of anger and he had a lot of jumpiness and had a lot of depression when he came back. I think all the change and coupled with the trauma that he went through, just being in that environment.

L - Was he able to get help from the VA?

S - He was but it was limited. The VA is very limited in what they can do because they have so many soldiers and basically if you don't have your arm hanging out of ya, you're to the back of the line. Now they're starting to be more availability for soldiers with PTSD and different kinds of disorders, like depression and things like that. There is more awareness now but at that time, like 6 years ago, there wasn't really. He came back and he was very angry and very depressed. He didn't work for a while and he worked for about two years as a boiler maker. They repair power plants and things so he was able to push all that to the side and just go to work so exhausted that you can't think about it, but I would notice flashes of anger here and there and the way he would act had changed. When he wasn't at work he would be down with his cousins playing video games; that's all he would do. He got laid off and then he went through this 2 year

period of depression and anger and blaming everybody for not having a job and not really doing anything to change the situation.

L - So where did you two... how did you support yourself?

S - We had savings. When he was a boiler maker, he made really good money. I was able to save money, I've always been in charge of our finances so I saved money, but then when he stopped working we had to live off the savings and that only lasted for about two years. Unemployment and everything lasted for about two years and then by the time...It was the middle of the third year, so 2 years and 6 months we had about 3,000 or so left in our savings and our bills were like 1600 a month and I was already going to St. Kate's. I had started going when he left for deployment, so I gave up my full time job and started going to St. Kate's and started working a couple part time jobs to keep myself busy because when he left I literally lost 20 lbs within a week just because of depression and not know what to do and not having anything to do. You don't know how much time you spend with someone until they're not there. We were best friends, we were always together, always doing something, always going somewhere, working or whatever, so when he left, I was like -"what am I gonna do?" And so I started making a plan. [] I was like I'm going back to school, I'm going to get this done. I don't care what anyone says because I'm a grown-up now and I can go back to school if I want to and we had the financial means to do it. I started going to community college and I ended up at St. Kate's.

L - How did you end up at St. Kate's?

S - I started going to St. Paul Tech for the respiratory care program, it's a two year program.

L - And you picked respiratory care?

S - I saw it on TV.

L - And it looked good.

S - And it looked good and it was like I want to do that. I saw it on TV and I was like "Oh that's cool" so I was like, do I have your support to go back to school? and he said "yeah." And I said – OK I can do this. I went to St. Paul they have a two-year program, I started there doing generals and I was there about a year and a half and they said our program is full until fall of 2013 so I said, "Crap what I'm gonna do?" I would have still been waiting if I chose to wait and they're competitive there, so all your numbers have to match up. So I said – "what am I going to do, I don't know what to do." But then I googled other programs and I found St. Kate's and I thought – "Oh God, that so much money, but I gave in and I called Dr. John Boatwright and I talked to him. And I said "what do I need to do to get into this program. I specifically want to go there to do this, this is all I want to do, what do I need to do? Tell me what to do and I'll do it." He said, "This is what you need to do, I'm sending you some information, we can meet, don't get your hopes up kind of thing, you might not get in." I hadn't even applied to the school yet or been accepted or anything. So I applied and I met with John Boatwright, when I left that meeting just because of the way that he was, and he was so welcoming and enthusiastic about the program here, I was like this is what I'm going to do.

L - This is for me.

S - This school is for me. I was able to start that next fall, it was the summer so I started in September.

L - Is that when you took women's history?

S - That's when I started. I started doing generals and stuff and that's how I came to be at St. Kate's so it was not the plan, but it ended up...

L - And it's what you found.

S - It's what I found and I'm still like – “Wow they let me in.” Some days I'm like, I can't believe I got in and other days, I'm like I can't believe I'm here or whatever, so that's how I came to be here.

L - How long all together was that?

S - I was here 4 years.. so 5 including St. Paul. 5 and a half something like that, a long time. It's going to be a long time.

L - It's pretty impressive. I know those medical programs have a ton of requirements.

S - My first year was doing all kinds of generals and stuff and doing the pre-reqs for the program and the last 3 years was just all the program, being immersed in the program. The same 20 students for 3 years. During that time my husband is still battling with his depression and it came down to the point where we can't renew this lease because we can't pay our bills. I worked one part time job at that point, at the point when we moved, I worked two part time jobs and with that money I was able to buy food and pay for gas.

L - Just the expenses.

S - And save a little bit here and there for tuition or whatever. It was really a struggle and I started battling my own depression because it was so overwhelming and my husband refused to get treatment, refused to get any kind of help.

L - that is so much on loved ones to live with.

S - It was so hard for me to live like that so that was during my second year, third year of being here at school and it was starting to affect my grades and I really came to the point where I had to decide am I going to keep doing what I'm doing or am I going to quit this and get a full time job so that I can at least live somewhere because right now what I'm doing... I would have been living in my car. It did actually come to the point where I lived in my car for a week because I didn't have anywhere to go.

L - Right you had a car.

S - Yeah I had a car and I wasn't going to go to my mom and stress her out and be like I need to sleep on your couch. It was pride for me, I did not want my younger siblings see me have nothing because I always had more than they have, not because I tried but because I always had it a little bit better than have.

L - And they look up to you.

S - Yeah, they look up to me and they look up to - I'm the person who always had money in my pocket whether it was a dollar and they don't have a dollar but I always have it together. For me to not have it together, I think in my mind it would cause them devastation.

L - And that's part of your identity.

S - That's part of my identity. Even when my brother died I kept it together for my mom and for them, that's who I am, I keep it together. So through all that I kept it together. I didn't let anyone know what was going on, the fact that we were going broke and I'm like - "I can't renew this lease, I have to move somewhere else. You can go where you want to but you're not coming with me," because at that point it was like self-preservation, - "I have to save myself." So I moved out of there and I lived in my car for a little bit. [] Then I was able to move in with my aunt, but that's still kind of iffy because when you live with a relative, they can kick you out at any point. You're still living in someone else's house. As long as they are happy with it, you can

still live there. So for me, living in that kind of environment, and having to rely on somebody else to put a roof over my head, is like the worst situation for me. I had to bite my tongue, make it work because I had decided that come hell or high water, I was going to graduate from this program so I had to make that decision to leave. You leave a part of yourself behind in order to save the other part.

L - When did that happen?

S - March of 2012. Spring breakish, I tried to time it along with my program. Everything revolved around my program. I'm like – I have a break from school, I can move now. I had to pack up six years of life, put it in a storage locker, leave him in the dirt and just go and save myself. A lot of people did, I think, in their own mind are like – “you are such a bitch – I can't believe you did that, I can't believe you're doing this and you should stick by him or blah blah blah.” To me it was I have to save myself, if I can't save me, I can't help you. If I'm lost, you're going to die, because he really does depend on me to be that strong person.

L - It sounds like a lot of people do.

S - Yeah, so I knew I had to get out of there and save myself. I basically told him you need to help yourself, you need to be your own advocate and if you don't fight for yourself, nobody is going to fight for you. That was March of 2012 and so this whole year I've been living with my aunt, and under her roof and as long as she is happy, I won't get kicked out but it always hangs over your head.

L - Insecurity.

S - Yeah the insecurity, I don't have a home.

L - In terms of now that you graduated that's got to feel like a huge accomplishment, and as you said, you already have two jobs.

S - Yeah I graduated. I've got two jobs, I'm currently looking for places to live and just be able to do that and be like I have an income that's going to sustain us that is good. The thing that surprised me the most is the amount of support and encouragement that I got from my surrounding community, not just the St. Kate's community but people that I had known all my life.

L - The Westside? They've seen you go through a lot.

S - Yeah and they were like – “Oh my god I'm so proud of you” – just like everybody that came out and said that they were like “oh my god.” At first I was embarrassed because we don't do that, we're not like that. I was like “oh my god” but everybody was like “I always knew you were going to do something with yourself,” so I got a lot of support from them. That was really surprising but it was really great.

L - Necessary.

S - And a long time coming, I think. We are able to give each other that appreciation, that praise because it's not really part of our culture either. We aren't raised to be proud of ourselves, so it was shocking to me. So I'm looking for my own place and just waiting to get my diploma in the mail and then I'll be like "I'm done." It's been a long road.

L - It's been a long road and you made it. I want to back up a little bit and ask; how did you like St. Kate's?

S - I love it here. I wish I could stay here, I know I can't but I wish... I'm going to take every opportunity to come back and audit classes and considering going for my masters in a few years, I think I want to get a masters in education. I'd really like to teach respiratory at some point when I get old but I'm considering getting a masters from St. Kate's that's definitely in my mind. So I'm just waiting to pay down the loans. I feel so much more at peace when I'm here. I feel like myself. You go out into your world but then when you're here, this has become my sense of normalcy. When you're in insecure housing, you don't have that, so this is my normal place.

L - It's a still point and probably it was predictable; you knew you had a lot of work but you also had friends and you knew you could do the work because you've proved that.

S - It's always the same here, everybody is supportive and nice. Everything looks the same and it's the consistency that sense of life normalcy for me is here. I tell people I grew up here. Everybody is like "You'll find yourself" and it's really true.

L - We were talking about this another time and I thought that was so interesting that part of it is that you had delayed higher education and can you say what you think you... what does that mean that you grew up here?

S - I grew up here... like – you find out what you're made of here and you grow up and you decide what you want for yourself. I think St. Kate's gives you the support that you need to be like "I'm not going to take any shit from anybody anymore ever." I really feel that now especially being graduated and really I started come into that I think my second year, because I was surrounded by all these supportive women and all these intelligent, educated women. Where I come from there's not, you're lucky if you have an Associate's Degree or a certificate from somewhere or something. But to be surrounded by these highly educated and supportive and down-to-earth women.. and the men too. Just having that support and knowing that just because people are educated, it doesn't mean that they think they are better than you. It gave me the strength to be who I am.

L - And you felt like you had gotten that message growing up that it's not for you, those people are snobby?

S - Yeah and they just want to look into your life so they can see or whatever. And here it's a whole different message; it's like everybody is lifting you up and saying you don't have to settle for anything you don't want to put up with, you can do better, you can be better, you can have

more, life is about more than what you had. They teach you to use the pieces of yourself that are back here in your past and put them all together so you are a whole person.

L - Wow, that's amazing.

S - That's how I feel anyways.

L - I think that's amazing. I also want to ask about classmates. Do you feel like they have been aware or sensitive to issues of poverty?

S - Most of my classmates, probably not. There are a few of my friends that know that I've lived in my car. They knew that I was living off of Campbell's soup for two months because my tuition was so high that I was saving up to pay it. They made sure that I ate, they would be like you eat first and I'll eat what you don't eat. That really surprised me because some of these people they came from money, they had a lot of money so they didn't know what it was like to be hungry.

L - And they were your friends.

crying

S - I have a hankie – I'm old school I have a hankie, I was raised by my older relatives so my uncle always say have a clean hankie because you never know.

L - My mom says that.

S - A hankie will save you.

L - Use it to tie things off. Emergency medical procedures.

laughing

S - My uncle said he used to work in the corn field and he said sometimes a hankie is better than a corn husk when you need it.

L - Gross.

S - He passed away a couple years ago now but he was like that. You would never believe the stuff that would come out of his mouth, it was like "Ok, Uncle Paul."

L - So, for the most part you've made some good friends and they were friends you could trust and you could open up to.

S - And they were friends I didn't expect to make because I think a couple of my closest friends were girls I could not stand. I could not stand them, I think one of them I was like... my first instinct was I wanted to punch her in the face and if I would have been somebody different, I probably would have but she has become one of my good friends, I consider her my good friend and my other really good friend I will be working with her at my current job and I really didn't

start talking to her until maybe just this last year or the summer. I've made some really good friends and I've learned things about people that have made me cast these stereotypes away because the wealthiest people in my class were the nicest, most down-to-earth people. And they didn't care if you had money or not, they didn't care about your clothes, they didn't care all they wanted to know "hey did you get that chapter on mechanical ventilation because I didn't get that" and they just cared about what you knew and if you could teach it to them and that was something I had never experienced before. Where I come from people, don't help you because they want to help you...sometimes they help you because they want something from you especially if it's an outside person or a white person; they didn't do something for you because they liked you, they did something for you because they wanted something..

L - But this was a peer and someone you could be...you were in control of understanding a chapter

S - They just wanted that share of knowledge and they were generally interested in who you were as a person and not really like the quality of your clothing or what color you were or whatever, where you were from , how poor you were or whatever they just wanted to be friends and they wanted to know you. I think we all changed each other. We all helped each other to open up and to be better therapists to be better people and definitely for me to be more tolerant because like I said some of those girls I just wanna...There was one of my classmates in particular she was so blunt with everything she said and she was so judgmental and now she's so open, she was so closed off..

L - Like a defense?

S - She's open and she's more accepting and even when she does get judgmental here, you know, so we helped each other grow as people. Even the younger... I call them the younger ones because most everyone was younger than me, you watch them grow into some silly little freshman to this fantastic person and this good therapist, compassionate therapist and watch each other at the clinic and you're like "you really got good at that" or "you're really doing well" it was that too.

L - And it was with each other

S - Just help each other in our studies and then help each other in life and you really get close to these people as people. Even our instructors, before I graduated I went in and told John Boatwright and I told him "If it wasn't for you and how you projected your enthusiasm and how you talked about the program I wouldn't have come here, I wouldn't have made this change in my life and change who I am but it's because of your passion and how you presented it all. You made me want to come here, you made me want to do this, you made me feel like this is a place where I belong." And I didn't put it that eloquently, I think what I said was "If you would have been an asshole to me, I would have never come here" but he knows me by this point and he was like "Oh ok" but it's really true.

L - I'm sure that means so much for him to hear that.

S - I always tell people, everybody in my program, and I said “if it wasn’t for John Boatwright, I wouldn’t be here, it’s true.

L - One person can be a good influence and that you also are making a difference, by being you, by doing what you do.

S - I think it’s really true that [if] you can find that person for you that can really make a difference in your life and hold onto that person, because he dug me out of some holes.

L - And part of it is trusting yourself and letting yourself trust.

S - And knowing yourself.

L - One thing that I think is a really important question is, now we know some of your classmates at St. Kate’s as you said, you don’t think really had much understanding of issues of poverty or homelessness. What would you want them to know? What would you want professors or anyone to know that you feel like they don’t see?

S - Just that homelessness can happen to anybody, at any time and anybody can be homeless. Homelessness sometimes doesn’t.. it doesn’t show on the outside. You’d look at me and think I lived in my car for a week or that I living off Progresso soup for two months, I went to church and prayed. When I got my adjusted financial aid and I only had to pay a portion of the amount that I thought I went to the chapel and got on my knees and prayed. It could be anybody at any

point, at any time and to always be open to the people that look to you as mentors. I think that's really how you're going to find out about people. If you have that student that is always coming to your office or looks up to you to just be open to that and to be open to the fact that it...there's no one set face for housing insecurity, there is no one person that is walking around with a homeless badge. It could be anybody, it could be your favorite student or anybody. Just like when we went to the capitol that day and the one guy...

L - The representative?

S - He's like "I don't know of any homeless people in my district" and I just felt like "you're looking at one right here."

L - When you said "St. Kate's is in your district, so yes, there are people struggling with it..."

S - Just to be aware.

L - I think that was a powerful thing for you to say.

S - I sincerely believe it. I didn't think.. if you would have talked to me 3 years ago and say do you think you'd ever be homeless.. I'd be like "no." You could struggle against it all you want, but if it's going to happen to you, it's gonna happen whether it be by your choice or by a circumstance or whatever.

L - There's a point in time.. it's very widespread.

S - I've had people say "Well it is kind of your choice, you could go on and live with your husband wherever he lives and whatever. You could have quit school and you could have got a job." Yeah it was my choice but how long is that job going to last? Is that job going to make ends meet? And what's it going to pay? Would have we gotten.. my thing was if we would have gotten evicted, an eviction can hurt you more than being homeless, because if you get evicted, you can't rent anywhere anymore or it's going to be twice as hard for you to get anywhere because people are going to see that eviction and they're going to be like "we're not going to rent to you." And I'm like "I'm not going to have that on my record" and then I'll be homeless for good? No. That's what I say to people that say "It's their choice." No, it's a choice sometimes that you have to make.

L - An impossible choice.

S - You have to choose a greater good. That's what I think.

L - You've proven you could do it.

S - That's the thing that I would tell people; be aware it's not just one person, it could happen to anybody and it is a choice, but to a certain extent.

L - Right, the deck is stacked.

S - You can control your choices but you can't control what happens as a result of them.

L - If you were doing the interview, is there a question that you think, geez she should ask this?

S - I don't think so.

L - Anything else you want to be included?

S - No, I think that the way that you do it is to just let people tell their own story inside of it, I think it is a pretty good way because I think sometimes with the questions you just get the answers and you don't get the back story of what led up to it. Letting people tell their stories – that's a good way.