

Interviewers: Cristina Zanoni and Geórgia Consença

Transcript: Cristina Zanoni

## **Karen Cervera and Yushan Chou**

### **What is your country of origin?**

K - I am from Mexico. I was born in Mexico City.

Y - I was born in a small village in Taiwan, but I grew up in Taipei, the capital

city. **What profession did you want to pursue when you were a kid?**

K - I wanted to be an actress, believe it or not. I watched too many soap operas in Mexico. I love to dance, and I love to sing, and I thought that that would be my future, you know, but later on, I found that I was too shy even to be an actor, so I gave up.

Y - So when I was a child, I wanted to be a teacher because I was so scared of teachers. And so I thought if I could become a teacher, then my students wouldn't be scared of me. And now, I volunteer in the library teaching Mandarin. **I don't call myself a teacher. I am more like a facilitator or a bridge; I want people to know about my country.** (At the Free Library, in person and now online)

### **Who are your students?**

Y - My students are mostly immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and France. I do have a retired English teacher that teaches English to students from China. It started in a group of around 18 people. It is hard because everyone has different language backgrounds, and I teach in English, so this is also a way to improve my English.

### **And what is your passion today?**

K - So, I still love to dance and sing, but I just, you know, with myself like when nobody can see me. I mean, I never took classes or anything or pursued them, so it's just something that I love to do as a hobby. But I feel like now professionally, I really like working with people, and that's what I see myself doing in the future, like, keep working with people.



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Y - I taught children during the summer as a part-time job, but I never considered myself a teacher. I enjoy that. Starting with people, because like Mandarim, when I am teaching, I'm studying again. Even native speakers, when you teach people, you need to know why we say the sentence in this way. I think, in the future, I want to, as Karen said, I like to work with people. I want to help people to pursue their dream, and I will feel so happy if I can help them. Also, I'd like to travel. Maybe in the future, I can do something about traveling and working with people.

### **How long have you been in the USA?**

K - So I've been in the United States for a little bit more than five years.

Y - I am here a little bit over three years, three years, and two months.

**Did you face any difficulties in your journey to come to the United States?** K - When I moved to the US I moved with my husband. I moved with a dependent visa, which means I couldn't work, and I couldn't study. In the beginning, I would say the first month was okay because, you know, the US was so new to me, and I was so excited, and I was getting to see the country where I was living now. Then, after a while, it was like, "Okay, what am I supposed to do now?". And that's when I started to feel like I was not at home anymore and that it wasn't as easy as I thought it was going to be.

And, you know, when I started speaking English outside, I wasn't that confident. I had some situations where people wouldn't understand me and wouldn't even try to understand me, you know, and that affected me so much that there was a point that I said, "You know what, I'm going to stop, stop trying for now." I was still studying at that time, I was doing some online studies, so I said, "Okay, I'm just going to focus on getting my degree, and I'm not going to worry about English right now." But that was a mistake because I got isolated, and I wouldn't leave my home at that time. I was living in Houston, Texas; it was before coming to Philadelphia.

And, you know, weeks, like became months, and I is like I used, I always say it's like my, my life froze, you know, for two years and a half, because I didn't have friends, I mean I would go out



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sometimes with some of my husband friends, but it's different. And I didn't have any activity, I didn't have anything to hold onto. And so it was very hard for me, and knowing that I couldn't work or study made it worse.

I felt very depressed, very isolated, and I really thought that I wouldn't stay, that I was going to go back at some point home because it just wasn't the life I was looking forward to. And then my husband got a job in his post-doctorate in Philadelphia. And we, when we moved here, I was like, "Okay, so, my life has to change. I have to do something. I cannot go back to being at home all the time." So, I was lucky because, in Philadelphia, there are more programs for immigrants than in Houston. So, I learned about English classes for spouses and family from the people that study and work at Penn. And that's where I first, you know, met my friends like people that I'm still friends with today. And they also connected to the Welcoming Center. And that's how my life started after three years and a half of arriving in the US. So yeah, it was very challenging.

Y - Oh, it's almost the same story. I came here because I want to support my husband, but the situation is slightly different from hers; we were in Toronto. After we got married, he got his first job, so we moved to Toronto; it was difficult for me because we were just married for three months. So it was supposed to be our honeymoon, but we moved to a new country, and then just the two of us, and our family was back in Taiwan.

I was lucky because I had a job in a restaurant, but the pay was not so good. I also didn't have a local education degree. So I was not happy, and I was always complaining, and my husband said, "If you don't like you can just quit," but Toronto is so expensive, and my husband's salary was not enough. So I was just trying to help a little bit.

I felt so guilty about buying a coffee in a cafe even because I didn't work. And, for example, one coffee, the cost was \$5, I mean I'm talking Canadian dollars, but you can imagine that it was \$5. So for this \$5, I can actually get a coffee bean, like a coffee powder, in a grocery for 2 dollars. I was financially independent when I was in Taiwan because I worked a full-time job, but when I moved to Toronto, I really had to depend on my husband. We went back to Taiwan because his



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contract ended. And then we moved back to Taiwan and I was thinking, "Okay, I want to stay in Taiwan, I don't want to move anymore, because I have my family, I had my friends here". And then he got a job here. Okay, so I came with no work permit, so I tried to find classes and then programs with no cost because international students pay a lot in universities. I finally got connected to the Welcoming Center and participated in the Immigrant Leadership Institute.

**What are the most significant changes in your life after coming to the US?** K - The first thing that comes to my mind is financial security, like, even when I wasn't working what my husband was earning, it was still more than what we would get paid in Mexico. And also, after a while like nowadays. We also get to help my family like, and it's amazing the difference it makes. Also, coming from Mexico, I'm not saying that Mexico is the most dangerous place in the world, but I did feel more safe being here. I was so surprised. I could be outside by myself like I could go to the groceries without worrying too much about my safety. Right now in Mexico, it's not safe for a woman to be out there. So being able to walk in the streets without any worries, having my phone outside without worrying that somebody would come and snatch it from my hand. It changes your life, that sense of safety that you'll feel that was one of those things that I notice and appreciate very much.

Y - So, in my case, it was opposite to Karen. I'm from Taiwan, which is very safe. I remember when sometimes when I finished work, I used to hang out with my friend and go home around nine, and I walk on the street by myself. Here I had some situations (...) where I had to call my husband nearly crying.

**As you know, you have been nominated by Amel, and I got inspired by what they shared: "Karen together with Yushan Chou created a space called Let's Talk Philly Conversation Circles, where immigrants come together to share their experiences, stories, and culture in the form of everyday and different conversational topics. All of this while building**



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**confidence when speaking in English, sharing, and developing skills, and meeting new people." Can you share more about it?**

K - Last year, we joined the Immigrant Leadership Institute - the sixth cohort -, and we started studying the barriers immigrants face when they move to the United States. And you know, there are many barriers, but we decided to go to something that also felt very personal. That was the English barrier, and especially you know when it comes to speaking. We did the listening campaigns on everything, and we noticed that the common thing was that there were classes out there. Still, there wasn't that opportunity for us to come to practice speaking in a safe, funny, and comfortable environment. So that's when we started to build Let's Talk Philly as that space where immigrants could come and practice their speaking skills while meeting other people while building relationships and sharing resources and sharing their skills.

Y - We notice there are many classes from different organizations, but we want to create a peer-to-peer learning model. We thought about creating a way that our participants can decide what they want to learn or how they want to learn together. The participant agrees with the common values in the circle because they have a common goal to achieve, so there is a common motivation included in our conversation circles.

K - Another thing that we wanted to achieve was confidence. We have noticed that confidence is what stands between us speaking the language most of the time than our English level. We already speak English, but sometimes we think it's not enough. So when we know that we're going to make mistakes, we don't speak at all. And I mean, I guess that's how most of all feel, so we also wanted to provide that safe space.

And one of the things like, you know, one of the questions you asked about what changed in my life when I came here. **When I moved here, I noticed that the biggest strength, and the thing that I love the most about the USA, was diversity. I never expected to find so many cultures here and so many talented people all struggling to find their place. So, we have learned that the best way**



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this country can be stronger is to work together, and immigrants are, you know, integrated. So that's also one of the things we want to achieve with the circles is that people can integrate and feel like they also belong in the city. Also, encourage them to stay. And, you know, to not have this feeling that we might all have at some point that up, like, "I'll just go back home because I'm never going to make it here." So, that's something that we want to change so that people feel like they can have their life and, you know, use their full potential here.

### **How many people went through the program?**

Y - 200 people

K - We had our first two rounds of circles. And then, we tried this model in other programs. So 100 people participated in the Let's Talk Philly, and the Welcoming Center used our model in other programs and events, totaling about 200 people participating in conversation circles.

Y - We don't have teachers in the conversation circle, but we have facilitators, and the facilitators are also immigrants. Suppose you are a facilitator in the conversation circle it means you have to make the commitment and make efforts. We know that many people like our project, but we find it's a little bit difficult to find facilitators. So we also need to work on that and try to get people involved to create more circles for more immigrants.

### **What advice would you give to people wanting to follow your steps?**

K - I mean, if they believe in the project and they believe in what they're doing to go for it, no matter what. I mean, it's not an easy road, and you know there are many challenges, but if they believe in what they're doing, they should go for it. And not, don't let you know those challenges in the way to stop them, because it makes a difference, especially when you love what you're doing.



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Y - I know it's hard to make your life in another country, but we have friends. I feel like I have an immigrant family from everywhere.

If they want to do things. Just go for it. And then, no matter how hard I mean, no one will know if there are chances unless they do.

If you fail and you learn from that, because that's why we don't even, in the beginning, we don't know if it will be successful. If you don't do it, then you will never know. But if we fail, we learn, and then we correct, and then we adjust, and then maybe things will get better.

**What advice would you give to your younger self back in Mexico and Taiwan?** Y - lol. Tell her to study English harder to get to know the word.

Don't be self-centered, be open-minded, and see things from different perspectives. I met so many people from different countries. Sometimes we have a common value, but sometimes we don't; we have a conflict, but conflict sometimes can be good. We all want a better life. We want to help. So we said we should all work together. And then that respect each other to respect diversity because that's also what makes American stronger. **Maybe this is the new American Dream, not only pursuing your dream but also a common value for everyone.**

K - This is a very difficult question, but I guess I would tell my younger self to trust herself and to keep dreaming big because it, you know, will happen. And that if you trust yourself, you can make it.

**How do you connect to your cultural roots in your everyday life?**

K - When I joined the Welcoming Center, and when I started meeting everybody, and with the conversation circles, I got to appreciate my culture more and appreciate more my background and be proud of where I come from. Because before I was very afraid of showing you know



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where I was coming from because I didn't know how people would react to that, you know, and there was a point that I really wanted to hide that I was, you know, coming from Mexico because I was scared, but joining the welcoming center I'm meeting you all, it made me really embrace who I am. So, every day, you know, I just share. I share with everybody about myself about my amazing culture, and how much I love it and how proud I am. I am thankful for being Mexican, you know, and so I tried to reconnect every day with my culture and share it with others. This is a good way to also get to know more about yourself and our culture.

Y - I always tell people I'm from Taiwan. Sometimes they think I'm Chinese. But, I mean, but this is that particular thing, and I don't want to talk about it, but I think the identity is very important for me now to tell people I'm from Taiwan, and I'm telling these, and then about Taiwanese culture. And why is that Taiwanese culture, and why is it different from China or other Asian countries. And also, you know that I like to cook. I mean, before I got married, I never cooked. I mean, my mom cooked everything. But after I got married, I had to ask her. "Do you think I should cook this?" So I literally asked for three months, everyday I called her.

I try to cook Chinese food, and then try to cook something from my memory for my grandma or my mom, and also adapt to share with friends.

By sharing with people made me realize how important it is to keep my identity and my culture here.

### **How do you feel about being an Everyday Genius?**

Y - To be honest, after our first meeting, I was very surprised because I noticed that meant that all those people are basically artists. So yeah, it is a milestone, because you are here in a foreign country. And then you got nominated. And then the title is everyday genius is so big.

K - Yeah, I agree with Yushan that you know the word genius just felt so big. And I don't know it's still, you know, difficult to do, to see myself as a genius, but I feel like, what, you know, the





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impact that we have in the community is important. Not just ours but you know all of all the impact that we're having in the community can inspire others that are as talented as we all are. And hopefully, invite like encourages them to try and also to share what they can do.

### **Would you like to add anything else?**

K - something that comes to my mind is like, I mean, we do want to say that we're not against English classes. We feel like they are very important. And we, I mean we encourage our participants and ourselves, are still taking English classes because it is important to build the base you know the roots of the language. So, what our project is like is that next step, where you just, would you come into practice and practice what you have to learn.

### **Do you see yourself staying in the USA?**

K - some, you know, something that I have learned in the past year is that life is uncertain, and that, you know, we're here today and we don't know tomorrow. So I really cannot tell if I will be here in 3, 5, 10 years, and I just tried to make the most out of faith every day. And if I'm, I mean if I get to stay here, I will do my best to be happy to make my family happy and keep, you know, supporting my community. And if not, I will do the same, but whatever I am.

Y - I was talking to my husband like just two days ago, like, because we are, we got our Green Card. Just that very recently.

As I said in the beginning, I am here to support my husband and his profession in biochemistry. And then if we go back to Taiwan, maybe there would not be many job opportunities for him. So, I really want to go back to Taiwan to stay with my family, especially my mom, like my dad passed away when I was 16. My mom, like she literally was my father and my mom over all these years, and I had a very close relationship

with her. I really want to be with her before she gets too old. And I want to be able to travel with her, and then to show her things are around. And so that's what I plan. I was planning to go back if a pandemic didn't happen, and I could visit my family, maybe once a year. We came here



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in 2018, in March. And I never went back to Taiwan after that. It was really a hard time for me to get through, and I cried. So many times. And so, I think I still see myself in five years when I will be in Taiwan. And I really want to make it happen.

Life is uncertain, maybe some event happened, or something happens, and I will lead you in a different direction, and then maybe things will be different.

So, I want to say that the first thing we want to do is bring Let's Talk Philly to the next level. It can become a long-term project or even an organization. We have so many amazing participants, and then we want their stories to be heard too. Yeah, we want their talents and skills to be recognized.