Interviewer: Okay so if you could please just start by saying your name and just tell a little bit about yourself

Cuica: So my name is Cuica Montoya and currently I’m the outreach and wellness program manager at the Colorado Village Collaborative. Um, it’s been quite a journey to get to this moment right now. Ahhhh, it feels um, like I’ve found my purpose in life. Ahh, so you know it started with my own life challenges and then recovery from those life challenges and um starting to use my voice once I was kinda at this point of where I’ve healed enough to start sharing my story and it just happened so naturally like I didn’t even think twice about it. That is when I got into advocacy work, I was a part of the Denver Public Library’s innovative peer navigator program and that just felt right and it’s just kind of all this journey has just opened up gradually as I’ve gone down it. Now I get to be here doing this really cool work, another innovative program. Like that blows my mind, to be a part of one is cool, but to be a part of another one is like alright!

Interviewer: Which program are you talking about?

Cuica: The Safe Outdoor Space program.

Interviewer: Okay, and I will ask you a little more about that. What was the first innovative program? The one at Denver Public?

Cuica: Yeah, Denver Public Library had some grant funding and the social worker there wanted to start a peer navigator program, and I was one of the first peer navigators at the library downtown.

Interviewer: Wow, I love how you’re framing this as a journey and I might back us up even a bit. Are you from Denver?

Cuica: Ah, yeah

Both: (laughter)

Cuica: So I was actually born in San Jose California and my mom transplanted us out here. She left my dad, it was a pretty physically abusive relationship, and her sister was out here in Denver. We were, my sister and I were transplanted out here when I was 4 and she was about almost 6, so we’re about 2 years apart. So I grew up here, I grew up in Central Denver actually Park Hill, where we’re at right now. I grew up in Park Hill, I went to all the Park Hill schools, Phillips Elementary School that’s now something else, Smiley Middle School, I started at East High School and ended up graduating from Kennedy High School. So Denver is my town, Denver is my city, Denver is my home.

Interviewer: Is your mom and aunt and sister, are they still here?

Cuica: So my aunt died, my mom is still here, and my sister is still here. We’re a pretty tight-knit crew, but we’re all still here. My sister is raising her family, she has a daughter and two sons with her husband. Then my mom and my stepdad and then it’s me. I’m an empty nester, my daughter’s in college, but also moved in with her boyfriend. So she’s actually out of the house out of the house.

Both: (laughter)

Interviewer: She’ll be calling you more, from time to time?

Cuica: I think she’s, unfortunately, trying to prove her make her footing, prove her way. You know how some of us eighteen year olds are like I’m done.

Both: (laughter)

Interviewer: Yes, I do know. So definitely a Denver person, and you alluded to earlier, that you have a story that for a while you weren’t able to talk about. Did you want to talk a little bit about that now?

Cuica: Yeah, so I grew up in a very normal, or what you would say is quote on quote normal. You know my stepdad was like my dad, I didn’t call him stepdad I called him dad. We went camping, you know we had the parties in the backyard at home, they had all their friends over. It was cool, it was just growing up. I think that once I hit 5th grade getting ready to head into middle school I started experiencing some bullying and didn’t quite feel like I fit in. I didn’t fit in, people were making fun of me because I look like a boy. I cut my hair that way, I thought it was cool.

A: It is cool

Both: Laughter

C: Back in the 80s who was that musician? Robert something, the chicks with the short hair..

A: The Dixie Chicks? The Cranberries?

C: No, older than that. Older than that. I’ll think of it later. Anyways, I looked like a boy, I got big fro do [xxx]. You know I started having some fitting in problems at school. I don’t know it was just like the 90s, my mom was an older mom, and the 90s kids were kinda out there.

Both: Laughter

C: We grew up on Snoop Dogg. We were just out there a little bit. Part of my fitting in looked really really, I don’t know what the right word to describe. We were in a really strict household, there was religion, we were very religious, and I looked like a boy. I had all these things factor into my predominant development years. The first thing that made me feel better or different about myself was like attention and boys and oh my god short skirts. My mom freaks out, and unfortunately I was a part of the 90s teenage pregnancy boom. That really charted my early high school years and 20s. I was not dealing with that trauma of being pregnant, I placed my son for open adoption, never really dealt with the loss. I was kind of shunned by the religion, so I had some abandonment things going on. I just shut down. That’s when I first met my love affair with alcohol. I was at college, I was 18, I wanted to get away. That was just not a good mix for me, but you know back then we really didn’t talk about mental health. Like I never received mental health treatment after that loss, it was all kind of wrapped up into one. So I just drowned myself, and I ended up dropping out of college. I went downtown, my sister got me a job in an office building. I was like okay. I was actually really good at being, I started out as a receptionist, and I got promoted, and then I got promoted. Then I had this ego at 19 years old, like oh I’m really good at this type of work. I ended up leaving that company and I started at a real estate company. There is where a lot of what I thought was success started. It was a fast-paced environment, it was commercial real estate. You know, people are making a ton of money. I started as a low-level admin and I just kinda climbed my way up. I created my own position there, got my real estate license, and I was a team leader for a crew of commercial real estate brokers. I also met my daughter’s father around then and you know he had some life challenges and we both had something to prove to the world. We also jived together because we drank a lot. We had this like, I consider it a great love because we really did love each other a ton, but we also built our lives on no foundation. We partied a lot, we made a lot of money, we bought a lot of things, we got into a lot of debt.

A: The high life.

C: You know all these things that to me said that I was okay. My 20s were about money, prestige, career, materialistic type things. We bought a big ole house when we were 24 and 25. You know we were in debt. Unfortunately, his upbringing and what he had been through opened up shady doors, and that’s when drugs entered my life. Drugs was a whole nother thing like that. Talk about severe emotional trauma when I was a young girl, never dealt with, and like these things I kept trying to fill a void, a hole in my life. It just never was enough. Not enough money, not enough booze, not enough drugs, not enough big house SUV type of things. Anyways his extracurricular activities, that’s a quote on quote, you won’t catch that on audio very much. Led him to being gone all the time, he actually ended up leaving me for somebody else. It was like that family breakup that was like the straw that broke our relationship. This is also when I experienced really dark times in regard to my mental health. I’m sure I had untreated depression, untreated anxiety. I had no self-worth due to a lot of things that had happened. So I fell, and I fell really hard. Either I fell or I hit a destruct button or a combination of both. So that family break up led to me just drowning in alcohol and drugs. People tried to help. I was willing to let people in on the booze, but there was like this unspoken thing about the drugs. I didn’t open up and when you try to treat one thing and not another really just like the core of it. When I tell you a little bit about my story I’ll tell you what I’ve learned.

A: Real quick actually, I’m sorry to interrupt. I would love to hear a little more about the unsaid thing about drugs.

C: So you know it was like booze is socially acceptable. It’s one of those things that people can get easily addicted to, but is completely in our faces all the time. It’s legal, it’s normalized, it’s almost a part of life. For some folks it’s even harder. For some reason me admitting that I was addicted to drugs, there was this whole, gosh I’m just trying to find the right words, but a huge self stigma. I didn’t want anything to be wrong with me so I never talked about my mental health. My mom tried to to ask why didn’t I try and go see a counselor. You know back then mental health was still very stigmatized. I was already battling low self worth so to say I need help was a compounded problem I didn’t want and then you add drugs to the mix. If I would have admitted back then that would have meant that something was really wrong with me. So there was a ton of shame, a ton of internalized self stigma in regard to that. So when I did seek help just for alcohol I wasn’t really getting anywhere. I ended up getting fired from my career that I’d had for about 8 years. Then my house went into foreclosure. I ended up catching criminal charges and wound myself up in court ordered treatment. So you know I was looking for treatment, but it was court ordered. I did give it a go, and that was the first time I was introduced to recovery and sobriety. I got connected to 12 Step Fellowships outside of the treatment program and I had about a year of sobriety. Then somebody in sobriety overdosed and died. I relapsed. I relapsed on heroin and this was the first time that heroin was a part of my life. I overdosed one of the first times that I did heroin and it scared me and then I got sober again. During the next year of journeying into recovery old patterns of behavior started cropping up. You know one of them was trying to fill holes with things that don’t help. I was bouncing around from relationship to relationship. Then the failure of those relationships just set off another round. So at this point I was just, let’s see, I’m trying not to lose my timing here. I was bouncing around from relationship to relationship. I actually got back into real estate at this point which I didn’t think was gonna be possible because of my felonies. I was managing a small investment firm, we were a broker for all those foreclosure homes in that boom, 08-09. Which is kind of weird, I kept wondering if I was going to see my house from Fannie Mae because we were a listing broker for them back in the day. Here I am flipping all these houses. I’m managing the listings, I’m doing all this stuff. I wasn’t a broker so I wasn’t getting commissions at this time, but you know I was paid a decent amount of money. What that ended up triggering was this ego that money fulfilled for me. Because if I had money then I was doing well. Again, I was stuck into that like old pattern of seeking outside things to fulfill this internal hole. So on the outside it looked like I was doing good. I ended up getting back together with my daughter’s father, which, he left me again. That re-traumatized me all over again and that is when I started facing housing instability. I lost my job. He kicked me out because he found out I was doing heroin. Then I was bouncing around friend’s couch to friend’s couch and then my friends were like “woah, what’s going on with you”? And then that’s when I started experiencing homelessness.

A: When they say “woah, what’s going on with you”? What do you mean? You’re doing this too much?

C: Yeah, you know, people knew I was like a drinker and that I partied. I think behind closed doors it was pretty in your face. Needles and IV drug use is scary. It’s a whole different ball game at that point. It’s one of those things that, it’s like the fastest car. You know, if you like driving fast, you want to get into the fastest car. So that’s kinda like how IV drug use was for me. If I’m going to do this I’m going to do this this way.

A: Wow. So when you were staying on friends’ couches is it that they were seeing that you were high or were they seeing paraphernalia?

C: You know it was a combination. I wasn’t functioning as somebody that was participating in a society. I was just not myself. People didn’t realize how much help I needed, and of course I didn’t want to ask for help. I still had that whole I got this thing, I don’t need help, nothing is wrong.

A: I could make a lot of money if I want to. Yeah.

C: It was when I started to experience homelessness that’s where I just reached a whole new bottom. I won’t go into any details, but street life is full of darkness and trauma and pain. It was around this time, I was in and out of jail all the time. Finally, they got sick of releasing me just for me to not follow through with any of the release conditions. So when I got arrested the last time which was probably the sixth time on the same charges. They held me on a no-bond hold. I am grateful that they did that because at this point I was able to get clean and refrain from using drugs. The Clarity started to seep back in, and I’m like, “what am I doing with my life”?

A: How long would you say that took, for the seeping of the clarity, for the clarity to start seeping back in?

C: Oh gosh, I would say probably right around 30 to 45 days after being in jail and then realizing I wasn’t going anywhere. I was fighting cases in multiple counties. I had looked into the mirror and I didn’t know who I was anymore at this point. Staring in a mirror I didn’t recognize the person that was staring back at me. This is where I was like I need to do something different and I was motivated. Of course my family weren’t as stoked when I got out because I had already burned some of those bridges. Like my sister wouldn’t let me stay, my mom wouldn’t let me stay. She actually welcomed me back for a couple of weeks, but she every day made it very clear that this was a temporary fourteen-day type of thing. She helped, I helped calling places, trying to get connected. She did, she helped me find a place, and it was a transitional program with the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. It was a program for chronically homeless folks who had co-occurring disorders with substance use and mental health.

A: Sorry to interrupt, about how long had you been experiencing homelessness at that time?

C: About three years

A: The forty five days in jail kind of ended that?

C: Yeah, I spent ninety days in jail. Then I entered that program. There was a lot of healing there, there was willingness. I started to take care of my mental health. What that looked like with my primary care physician and getting evaluated. Yeah, figuring out what that part looked like. Starting to take care of my physical wellbeing as well. I would say healing for that next fourteen months was a full-time job. I was accountable to about five different people during that time frame. I had a probation officer, I had a sponsor, I had a therapist, and I had a group therapist, there was one more. It’s leaving me, but I had five people that I was accountable to. There was one more lapse, one more relapse there. It was a death, actually two deaths. It was my aunt’s death, a death of somebody I had met in recovery, and a relationship failed. These were what I call my remaining pieces to my puzzle. Because it was how much worth I tied to who was with me, my relationships. At the bottom, the core, was that grief, that loss that I never dealt with from all those years back. I was willing at that point. So I stopped dating and I did even more you know, I think the grief group started right around that time. Then I got my apartment, I was transitioned from that programing to my apartment. I started working, and it was like rolling burritos at Illegal Pete’s. I didn’t know what I was going to do. On paper I looked horrible.

Both: (Laugh)

C: Like I had this amazing resume of 8 years, and then I had this other amazing job, and then it was like where’s Cuica? My credit was horrible, my resume was horrible, my criminal record was horrible. So every piece of paper said a really bad thing about me. So I was like I’m gonna go somewhere where I don’t have to worry about that and Illegal Pete’s was like that first place. I don’t know, it’s a really cool environment. You can hang out with your tattoos out, I didn’t have any pressure. You know I didn’t have that, “I have to do something with my life make a lot of money” pressure. I got to know who I was. I got to be silly, out there, you know I was heavy into makeup back then so I had like cat eyeliner, half my head was shaved, and all my tattoos were hanging out. I got to know this funny Cuica, that I’d never known was there. I just smiled a lot, I laughed a lot and I think once that self esteem and self confidence started building up in me it kinda bubbled into my heart and my heart was like I need to do more. From there I found out about peer support training and got trained. My first job was at the Denver Public Library which brought me to this leg of my journey.

A: Right, right, and circling back since we’re are in the Denver Public Library

C: Yeah, kinda cool!

A: Wow, you’re clearly so reflective about this and so articulate, I mean at one point you said the last pieces of the puzzle. It’s so clear that you see this puzzle now. I mean this sounds cheesy, but what do you see when you look in the mirror now?

C: Well, wow, when I have time to actually look in the mirror.

A: There are no cat eye makeup happening right now.

Both: (Laugh)

C: I’m very grateful. I feel like I’m living like a dream life that I haven’t even dreamt yet. Like there’s no way I could have written on a piece of paper what my dream job was when I went on this peer support journey. I just knew that I wanted to help somebody else like me. As you know peer support and peer navigation has really bubbled up in the last, it’s been around for 20-30 years, but It’s really gotten popular and is integrated now with clinical work. It’s just amazing because the piece that I think that people with lived experience bring to the work is that hope. I’m not saying clinical folks can’t inspire hope as well. When somebody says I’ve been exactly where you are, I don’t know exactly how you’re feeling, but I know what it’s like to feel very similar. That is when magic happened, like I said, I had an amazing boss at the Denver Public Library, Elissa Hardy, she was really like get involved, serve on these committees. She introduced me into a lot of different advocacy and using my voice. That’s when I started on the leadership committee for the collective impact for Denver’s response to the opioid use crisis. Then that kind of got me started in city work as far as advisory capacity goes. I was appointed by the mayor to serve on the advisory committee for housing people experiencing homelessness. Then we were part of the preliminary process before the Department of Housing and Stability was established, so I was there when the mayor signed that executive order. Now I serve on the strategic advisors for the Department of Housing and Stability. So that’s where this fire came from, well surviving homelessness was really where the fire came from, but also being at the table and really seeing meaningful changes toward policy in regard to the lens of lived experience. Like starting to look at how we create programs or sustain programs or fun programs that center the directly impacted person. It’s hard to describe what values that adds, but it’s very tangible because you can create and design programs all day but when it comes down to it and you’re trying to make somebody go, who doesn’t have a license, go get a license and then a birth certificate. Remember when I said it’s a full-time job to heal?

A: Yeah, yeah

C: It’s a full-time job to be homeless. It’s a full-time job to get out of homelessness. So all that advisory work was happening, I ended up getting an opportunity to take my skill set to the next level without necessarily having that education background. So I took advantage of that, and I started to do case management for a non-profit that helped the same population but a little bit farther down the continuum because they were doing job training. So I got to be part of that next step in people’s lives. So that program I was jamming, doing employment specialist then, and I had just gotten the lead employment specialist gig when the pandemic hit. Then I got laid off because they shut down the Human Services building and that’s where their main kitchen was. So their business went away, so you know half the staff got laid off. I was like, I don’t know what I’m gonna do. That old anxiety crept back in. You know I had that on my resume, but I was panicking. There was a pandemic, my daughter can’t graduate like a normal person. She was class of 2020. There was a lot going on.

A: Oh my gosh. Oh geeeze.

C: So my boss now Cole Chandler reached out to one of the strategic partners for the city of Denver in the Department of Housing and Stability and was like hey I want to put together this program, but I need somebody that’s, do you know anybody that has been through homelessness and is in recovery and is you know? I would have loved to have been a fly on that wall. How did that happen? I always ask him, what did that conversation sound like? But Chris gave him my name, and he had reached out to me on Linkedin. I had just picked up my last check, I’m sitting in my car and I like sighed, I grabbed my phone before I started driving, and there’s this message, and it was Cole.

A: No way. Cole, for any listeners who don’t know, is?

C: The executive director of the Colorado Village Collaborative and was one of the thought partners in putting together the concept of the Safe Outdoor Space.

Both: (laugh) which brings us to why we’re here today.

C: It’s a very long story right?

A: No, it’s a fantastic story and the way you tell it is fantastic. Before we jump into SOS I have one last question. How do you define homelessness?

C: Well, I think homelessness is any state of being where somebody does not have a place to call their own. There’s all these defined, HUD defined definitions of “Literally Homeless” . You know?

Both: (Laugh)

A: I think about that phrase all the time.

C: Because I consider myself homeless the minute I lost my home which was also tied to a relationship and family breakup. That was when I considered my homelessness started.

A: But HUD doesn’t consider that because you had couches to sleep on?

C: Yup, yup so HUD considers family and friends housing, if you’re in jail for 90 days or more that’s housing, if you’re in the hospital for 90 days or more that’s housing. But my definition is that if you don’t have a regular place to go home to that’s yours that there’s no strings attached, you know maybe rent is attached to it. I’m talking about places to stay where you have to, I don’t know, whatever.

A: Okay, okay, yeah, yeah. I’m so glad you brought up “literal homelessness” cause that phrase is just bananas. So we know how you came to work at SOS, on this kind of serendipitous journey. I’d love to hear you describe just your very first day on that job.

C: (laugh) Well talk about getting hired as a contractor in a pandemic where you’re meeting the team on zoom. That was my first day.

A: And it was before anyone knew Zoom, so you’re looking for mute.

C: Oh my goodness, right, and here I am just this little box on a screen. It was a very tiny organization. Even back when SOS started, it was Cole, our maintenance person Steel, Dorthy, and then we had an intern. So it was like three employees plus an intern. The intern and I were hired on the same day, she had known them longer than me, but it was like zoom, “Hi guys, I’m this person that’s going to be putting this”. They thought we were going to open. So I was hired in June of 2020 and they thought we were going to open within weeks. So I started on Zoom, I got all my documents that were, I had to go through them and use my lens of lived experience. How are we going to make this program desirable for folks who are sleeping outside? Then also take into account the additional barriers of accessing the shelter system here in Denver and really just have a space that’s meaningful. Also, bring all the necessary resources in for people that don’t have access to that in a global health crisis. We didn’t know when COVID first hit surfaces or touching. How does somebody who is unsheltered wash their hands, go to the bathroom, take a shower? Then the shelter in place happened. How does somebody who is outside shelter in place?

A: I’d be so curious. When you were reviewing those documents what were some things you were finding that others couldn’t see that you could see from your lived experience?

C: Well, it wasn’t that I found something that didn’t work. It was like hey here’s this document, add to it, take away from it, whatever. I immediately developed a crisis response plan that didn’t include the cops unless it was an emergency. I know how traumatizing badges are, not just being outside, but that life is, the minute you see a badge you’re like “aawwwwwwh, I have a warrant”.

[ 37:14]

A: The stakes are high.

C: Yeah, the stakes are really high. That was one of the first things, really trying to meet folks where they’re at. If they’re having a mental health crisis what are our resources here in Denver? Before STAR there was the crisis intervention response unit which is the social worker and homeless outreach officer. Then STAR came about during this time too, or expanded during this time. I actually sat on a committee with the person that really started it and expanded it. She’s now the director of operations.

A: And could you define STAR?

C: The STAR program is services trained assisted response which is a paramedic and a clinician. So taking the badge all the way out of it. When I started at the Safe Outdoor Space and I’m doing these documents and I’m preparing this crisis plan and I call my buddy Carly and I’m like hey. She’s like “bet, I got your back I owe you so much”. I used to go speak at her, she’s a professor at DU, so I’d speak for her social work classes that she was teaching. She’s like “I owe you so many favors”.

A: Well I’m about to use em.

C: This is the best favor you can provide me, is how I can incorporate new ways of responding to either substance misuse crisis or mental health crisis without the badge. So that was one of the first things I developed in that plan.

A: Wow, so that was really a priority when thinking about SOS.

C: Yeah, absolutely, and you know I say that now with having now fostered a pretty good relationship with the Denver Police Department.

A: Interesting

C: Yeah, I had just recently got off the phone with one of the commanders at one of the districts. It was because of some harassment that we were experiencing at the Safe Outdoor Space in Park Hill. We can go into that later. She was like “anything I can do to help you guys feel safer, because we love what you’re doing, it makes our jobs so much easier and better, and we need more of these”.

A: Wow, that is cool.

C: Yeah, which is so odd for me you know. Being that person that comes from that like no cops, and I still have a no cops attitude but in a different way. We don’t necessarily need this if there is something else that we can provide for folks. Then a lot of the services that we provide that was one of the things that I contributed quite a bit to. My journey took a lot of different organizations I was involved, hope community reentry project. It’s not around anymore, but that was the fifth person that I was accountable to. I had a case manager there.

Both: (laugh)

A: I knew you’d get it

C: Like I had Community Reentry Group. I had the Arapahoe House Treatment. I had Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. So I had all these connections that helped me with my full-time job. So I know that it takes more than just one organization to help meet people’s needs. So I wanted as many people into the space as possible. Because it’s a full-time job and taking the bus everywhere. It takes so much, and it’s dedication. That dedication wears down every day you miss a bus and miss an appointment or this happens. You know it’s exhausting. So I wanted to make it as convenient as possible for people to get their needs met. Of course I kind of amassed this crew of organizations doing cool work because of not only access to services but I was part of connecting people to those services. Having that intimate knowledge of how accessing services works is so important because you can actually provide a level of this is what you’re going to expect when you go here. Because so much so, and this isn’t a knock on any provider or any nonprofit, but like that copied a million times over piece of paper that has all those resources on there and you hand that to somebody getting out of jail. You know, here are these resources, not that that’s bad, I’m not knocking that because it’s important to get the word out about organizations in the community doing important work but by having intimate knowledge of how those programs work, you realistically set expectations with somebody. Accessing this service is going to take maybe five to seven times of going there at 7:30 in the morning and waiting. You know because when somebody just goes there and they didn’t know that they were going to have to try again a few times then that gets really disappointing and you lose hope and then you’re like why not just give up and not even try. So there was that piece and really just getting buy-in from these different partners. We had some great organizations that were thought partners in this proposal. You know we started off as this privately funded, we’re gonna open one site for the Summer during the pandemic.

Both: [laugh]

C: And we giggle because we know that didn’t happen.

A: Right, right. You started June 2020, when did the first site open?

C: December of 2020, in the middle of Winter. We have photos of the platforms being built with snow on them.

A: Wow, and this I should back up. Y’all were designing this model, right? Were you following this model from anywhere else?

C: So there were a couple of cities that had quickly opened some of these up. So the concept has been, there is like a broad concept of this. And I think it’s been talked about for a long time like having just a tent community. I know we did model some of our policies and procedures off of Las Cruces New Mexico, they have Camp Hope. They were a really big part of that. They have successfully operated something similar for like the last ten years. During the pandemic there was, San Francisco opened something, Tampa Bay opened something, so there were just some different models. Seattle had one for Black folks and one for Indigenous folks and all these different things. Let’s see I got distracted. We loosely modeled it based on something, we didn’t create this from thin air. You know tent communities have been long advocated for here in Denver even. One of our partners St. Francis Center, the executive director Tom Moore, have been talking about tent communities for probably about 20 years. It’s not a new concept, but we did you know, I think it was the first time it’s been done by somebody who was previously homeless.

A: And clearly you’ve shaped it so specifically to the Denver context and the resources Denver does and does not have.

C: Yeah, well you know, I have first-hand knowledge of how it all works, well maybe not all of it, but like a good chunk of it. And you know, how much work it takes. So I wanted a space that was safe and service-rich, resource-rich, you know. One of the other things, and of course I got boots on the ground and I went outreaching to other encampments. I did a ton of outreaching and that’s where I reconnected with some of the people I knew from the library and I reconnected with people I knew outside. We did surveys, we talked about the rules, what their thoughts were on them. Policies like that so you know folks had a direct impact on a lot of things too. I would say the biggest thing that we changed based on input from directly impacted people was our model was program staff during the day and contracted security company at night. They were like no, no badges. That’s when I designed the 24/7 program staff model. Then of course being somebody with lived experience I was like I wanna hire peers, peer supporters, people with lived experience. My boss was like go ahead and I’m like sweet. So it was important to me to when they walked in they could one build that trust immediately. Then two it’s more like yes they’re program staff but they’re also your peer.

A: And that’s almost all staff are peers right?

C: Yup, so well currently I would say we have 2 staff out of 10, so about eighty percent are peers. And at the Regis SOS I would say about fifty percent are peers but they’ve decided that they wanted the same model.

A: Before I ask more about SOS, sorry I keep pushing it off just because your story is so fascinating, if you’re comfortable talking about it I’d be so curious to hear what it was like for you to reconnect with people whom you had lived with previously on the streets as you were doing this outreach in such a different place now. If you’re comfortable.

C: Yeah, absolutely, so there were a couple of different times in my story. So one at the library, I you know connected with people then and it was magical. They called it the Cuica magic at DPL because it was like that instant connection. I think the biggest thing that seeing somebody who’s made it out it gives that it sparks that light that hope that “how did you get out?”. You know, previously there were a lot of people in my life who thought I was going to die. When I said I didn’t want to go into details I’ll tell you that I’ve been in and out of the hospital 14 different times for alcohol and drug-related overdoses. So when they saw me, and saw how well I was doing, you know I’m healthier now. Maybe a little bit too much weight but that’s all due to the pandemic, that’s all.

Both: [laugh]

A: The COVID nineteen.

C: I give myself grace in that, but yeah people get excited. They’re like, “Cuica, what are you doing”? So it was cool and like. One of my old library customers moved into my SOS and back at the library we tried to get him into a long-term treatment program and was unsuccessful. Then he moved into the SOS and about four months five months in he was like I think I’m ready to try that program again. Yesterday, no, today he got on a bus to go to that program.

A: Today? Wow wow

C: This morning. Two year transitional program.

A: Oh my gosh, wow, so that’s a special kind of feeling?

C: Yeah, I think people know me now. You know just for the boots on the groundwork of connecting with people.

A: Known name and known face.

C: Yes. One of my gifts was being able to just recognize faces and I have a really good memory so I know people’s, I don’t know their whole name, but I’m really good with faces and also pretty good at names. So I remember, I can you know, I know almost everybody’s name at each SOS site. Now if it gets bigger I don’t know if I can keep up that pace, but I make a point to say hi, how are you, what’s your name, welcome home. Those are some of my favorite things to say to folks.

A: Last question I promise before digging more into SOS. Thinking again of when you reconnected with people and I’m just thinking about your work now too generally, and again you do not need to answer if you don’t want to. Is it sometimes triggering being in these spaces just given all of what you’ve been through? And if so, what do you do about that?

C: You just brought up a memory that I had of maybe not one of my favorite therapists that I’ve had over the years.

A: I just reminded you of them?

C: But, no no, not you, but the question did. I was meeting with this therapist and I was excited about peer work. She was like uck, and gave me this look that was like “what’? You think that’s a good idea, based on” you know? It felt very judgemental and it felt so gross that I stopped the session, I walked out and I never saw her again.

A: Good for you.

C: I just kept pursuing. I think that I had been on this healing journey for about fourteen months and yes there were some things that were still triggering. Part of why I wanted to do more instead of staying in the restaurant industry was just the being around a lot of intoxicated people. I knew that was not something that I wanted to sustain long-term just because it’s not fun when you’re sober and you’re dealing with people that are like oh my gosh do you know how you are acting right now? I remained connected to one on one therapy and I knew that I had to take care of myself if I was going to be doing this work. I didn’t go into it thinking oh I got this because you remember when I had it before I didn’t really have it.

A: You can lose it when you have it.

C: So I had gotten to this really good place of being able to take care of myself and support my recovery journey while doing this tough work. There is something really magical about peer work is that sometimes it’s both, self care and work. There is something fulfilling about helping other people. Now would I say that’s the only thing you should be doing to take care of yourself? No, absolutely not. You need to take care of yourself, like self care and downtime. I have to recharge, which means unplugging and just not doing anything.

A: Right, right, lay. Like right now I am laying.

Both: [laugh]

C: Did I answer the question? Now I feel like I’ve got, I don’t think I’ve got it all figured out, but I think that I’ve been through this healing process long enough that I know that as long as I’m doing these things for me I can do this for other people. There is a balance and when somebody is still really new or fresh or maybe haven’t healed or identified triggers it’s probably going to be really tough. I would say that I haven’t, I’m very grateful.

A: Now I’ll let you talk more about SOS. I’d love if you could return to that, when you’re setting up this first camp, December of 2020. It’s snowing, it’s cold, it’s six months later than everyone thought it would be.

C: It’s six months later and a lot of work. You know we had two false starts. We did community engagement which was really one of the first times that a homelessness services provider, well maybe not the first time, there was probably other people doing it before us. We took an active role because we knew it was a really unique thing we were asking of neighborhoods. The first community engagement really brought forward the injustices this particular neighborhood had already endured. The historical marginalization of the LatinX community in Globeville and the I70 expansion. It just had a long history of redlining, underfunded, health disparities. The city had just opened two auxiliary shelters during COVID. They’re like, you’re just. I felt the pain in my gut. I said, I personally wouldn’t feel comfortable operating the space just pushing it forward. So we decided that that probably wasn’t going to be a sustainable option also due to the political climate. We’re very unique here in Denver where homelessness has become such a hot and cold political issue.

A: Is that unique amongst cities? I really don’t know.

C: I don’t know, maybe.

A: It’s definitely a thing here though

C: Yeah, Denver has made national news with some of the responses to the unsheltered homelessness crisis so not gonna go into politics.

A: Life’s too short for that

C: Yeah, it’s not the appropriate space for that. We felt that it wasn’t right to go there. Our next venture was again in another historically marginalized neighborhood, but we also brought in racial equity folks to make sure that we were honoring the Black experience in the Black neighborhood, it was in the Five Points Neighborhood. We were gonna use public right of way. We decided to try where unsanctioned illegal camping was already happening. It didn’t happen, I think somebody in that neighborhood knew the right person to call. Maybe even had the mayor’s number directly, who knows? But it got pulled.

A: Right out from under you?

C: Yeah, we were getting ready to start the community engagement process and the plug was pulled. So it was like uuggghhhh. Talk about like ramping up. We had already been through a brutal community engagement process, and not brutal because of the neighborhood, just brutal because we’re dealing with really heavy community, redlining, I mean we’re here in homelessness because of a lot of systemic injustices. So hearing them is heavy, so that’s what I mean when I describe them as brutal.

A: And meanwhile the pressure’s on to find a space

C: Yeah, we had private funds and they were like we need to get this going. So we finally found some non-city land, private partnerships through faith communities that were willing to get right by the fire with us. They’re like, we believe in this, let’s do this. We got the registered neighborhood organization, actually the registered neighborhood organization in Park Hill, I forget when they got involved, but they were involved pretty early on. They wanted another option because obviously Capitol Hill Downtown experienced the overburden of unsheltered homelessness, so they were on board, and the community engagement process was brutal. I think we had 286 people on one of the first community calls.

A: In Park Hill?

C: No this was Capitol Hill, the first two that opened up were in Capitol Hill, both in Capitol Hill. We didn’t have support other than support that was already garnered with community organizations and some of the registered neighborhood organizations and we had some buy-in from the city at this point, some. It was still really new, but we opened it and I feel like we shot it out of the park. Going into it I would say that three weeks prior when we were just like I’m hiring, and my old stuff sometimes surfaces every now and then, like self doubt, what am I doing? I definitely suffer with some bouts of Imposter Syndrome. I graduated high school, and that’s it. Granted I had careers and I have skills. Part of me was like my main skill that I’m bringing into this is my lived experience. So my head told me, it talked a little shit I won’t lie. What are you getting yourself into? It was amazing. It was one of those things that was like wow, this is amazing. We’re providing dignity, we started getting this amass of supporters. We operate a meal train that basically people are providing meals to 40 people, now add 60 on top of that now that we’ve expanded.

A: Regularly? Like this is sustained?

C: Yeah, like every day, almost. We’ve probably only purchased 10 meals since we started.

A: Can you tell me what dignity looks like in these spaces?

C: Dignity looks like you have a place to put your stuff, where you can get a goodnight’s rest, where you don’t have to fight for scraps. You’re getting your needs met by being able to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night without having to not have toilet paper or a bathroom to sit in. Taking a shower, washing clothes. Having somebody say good morning, how’re you doing, what’s on your agenda today, hey we have so and so coming in. You know we bring the library, library is my real dog, I bring the library with me everywhere I go. They bring in technology services, they’ve recently expanded their technology access, so they’ve provided phones for people. If you could imagine not having electricity that’s bringing dignity to somebody. Being able to charge a phone, if you don’t have a charge on your phone can you apply for jobs? We take for granted our cell phones. What we started seeing is people, I think it turned into a protective factor, they took pride in their home. They wanted the safety to continue. We got a lot of buy in on our community agreements because they have pride in this because they know if this works that they’ll actually expand it and other people could have opportunities. One of our residents who has been with us has actually helped build all four different SOSs. The two were shut down when the leases ended, and then we moved to Park Hill and Regis. This resident I met on one of my outreaching events and he was newly experiencing unsheltered homelessness because he got a notice to quit because his apartment building was being turned into luxury condos.

A: No way?

C: His apartment, he lived there for 12 years. In a pandemic. But he was like, “you guys need some help building this”? He pointed at the 16th and Pearl SOS. I was like “yeah”. He has now helped build all four sites.

A: Like physically helped build it?

C: Physically helped build it. He is now hopefully, we’re just waiting on his apartment unit. So hopefully we’ll see him in an apartment in the next, hopefully by the next month.

A: I want to follow up on two things you just mentioned. The first, a few times you talked about safety and thinking about SOS standing for Safe Outdoor Spaces. I’d love to hear what safety means to you in this context.

C: Well safety is, safety in the site means they know that they have staff there that not only are there to protect the integrity of the site, the safety of the site from outside. They’re there also with their own lived experience and their own stories, and that provides a sense of safety. I know that one of the highest compliments I’ve still received to date is somebody saying “oh my gosh Cuica, you really hired a good staff”. It was coming from a resident. When you think of the folks that make up unsheltered homelessness or are not accessing shelter for a variety of reasons. Either curfews, or couples can’t enter together, people with pets. We have gender-based [xxx?] sheltering system here in Denver so LGBTQIA folks don’t quite feel comfortable there. Then there’s also unfortunately there’s when you access services and somebody is a jerk, there is provider trauma. I think that, I can’t even really go into depth about why that happens, but I know burnout, you know. People living in survival mode who’ve experienced an insane amount of trauma may on the outside, this can be really scary. So I’m sure people are tired and worn out.

A: And have their own biases.

C: Yes, thank you, yes, and unfortunately that’s a thing. So hearing that compliment coming from somebody that doesn’t feel dignity in a lot of places felt that dignity because of incorporating centering lived experience. Because we’re centering their experience. We’re centering people who have been out of it and in recovery. We’re centering that, and it’s really I think the secret sauce. Which is not really secret sauce, it’s out there.

A: It’s just not used sauce. It’s neglected sauce.

C: Yeah, it’s not as, you don’t typically find many organizations.

A: I love how you connected that to safety, it makes so much sense. The other thing you mentioned a few minutes ago that I wanted to follow up on was that these leases were on a term, a fixed term. I’d be curious to hear, you giggle, I’d be curious to hear how that changes the work. How it impacts the way you’re thinking about these spaces and the communities.

C: Yeah so you know, being that this project is so innovative and there are a lot of [XXX?] stigmas out there about people experiencing homelessness. We wanted to make it as much of a bite-sized amount as possible for housed folks to digest. So we knew that we needed to keep it limited and we had hard stops at our first two locations because of the newness of it. Of course, when move time came, we were like “oooh why did we do this”? We were really glad we did because we also proved and showed our commitment to the neighborhood by honoring our six month timeline.

[1 hour 11 minutes 12 seconds]

Now, I'm not gonna lie -- moving SOS...is not a fun thing to do. The logistics are a nightmare. We did it. We moved everybody to one site because it was larger and already built while we deconstructed those sites and moved that to the other site in Park Hill. And established that site.

A: What are some parts of that process that someone on the outside wouldn't expect?

C: Yeah, so these platforms are huge. They're --

A: The platforms that the tents are on.

C: Yep. The platforms that the tents, and they're plywood and 2-by-4s, but once you factor in, they're about 60-square feet, so...and there were 52 platforms. [laughs]. Right. And we also, because we wanted, because we have electricity, we had to take up all the electricity, move the electrical panel, get...weed the parking lots. I mean, we had to return them to the, you know, normal -- we didn't quite weed cuz it was in the middle -- well no, we did weed. Because it was May by then. Yeah. You know making sure we've got, you know, couldn't tell we were there before, you know. So there's the moving of the actual people. So we've got 50 people we're trying to move with their belongings, so it's like 50 individualized moves all in one day. Think about that. [laughs]. Think about -- granted, it's not a ton of stuff. We tried to limit people to two boxes. We wanted people to, you know -- sometimes they're, people collect things. I collected things! I was a bag lady when I was experiencing homelessness. But that was also, had a tie with how I looked. So I, if I didn't look homeless, I felt better about myself. So I always had a ton of luggage that I had to move around, because I was homeless. [laughs]. So I was like a bag lady, I had so much stuff! So you amass things, so we wanted it to be two boxes, some people brought a little bit more. But that's like...it's a lot of moving.

A: Was there also some trauma with guests? With residents?

C: Yes. It's an extremely destabilizing process. It's not our favorite thing to do. We have now started talking about longer terms. Because it is destabilizing. You know, you think when you're done moving, you're like, oh my goodness, I just wanna re-do -- we, you just wanna rest!

A: And not for, like, 6 months, but for 10 years.

C: And then we blended two different communities. So you've gotta think that there was some destabilization with who you're seeing. At the other site that was operating, that operated on the private funds by EarthLinks, they were women and transgender. So we had to consider placement of folks that didn't feel safe around men, because now we were turning co-ed. There were so many different things. And then we moved...cuz of our hard stop, we moved to Regis before we had power. In the middle of the summer.

A: Ooh. It's a hot summer.

C: So -- in a middle of a parking lot. So [laughs]. It was hot! We couldn't plug in any fans. So [laughs]. That was destabilizing as well, people were like "what is happening right now?" Yeah. We've had a lot of challenges. A lot of learning, a lot of --

A: Yeah.

C: -- growing. But we know we don't want to do that.

A: Every six --

C: Every six months. We know that now. [laughs].

A: [laughs]Six months might be too short! Well, and, it's so interesting to me that this time frame is kind of -- it's a response to people not feeling comfortable with these sites being in their neighborhoods. I would be curious to hear a little bit of your experiences, talking with neighborhoods -- you told us about those initial community engagements, but I'd be curious to hear also about just some of the specific things you're hearing people say. Both pro and con, maybe, or whatever, whichever ones stand out to you in terms of the way people without this lived experience are perceiving what it means to be experiencing homelessness.

C: Yeah. I think one of the biggest misconceptions is -- you know, when we went through learning how important words are. Um, so when we started, we started calling it a "sanctioned campsite." And then we went to -- ah, God, I don't even know if I remember the phrase -- but what that was doing is associating illegal -- what the city calls "Illegal" -- encampments. So I think one of the biggest misperceptions that we still experience, is they think it's gonna be a legal way for the existing status quo of encampments. So, you're talking about encampments that don't have access to hygiene, handwashing facilities, bathrooms. You know, trash. And they think that that's what's gonna come into their neighborhoods. Well, nobody -- we've really turned some people's minds, we've changed their minds, cuz they're like, "oh, this isn't what I was picturing at all." So there's, that's why we decided, we switched it, eventually, to Safe Outdoor Space Managed Site.

A: Wow. So taking out the word "camping."

C: Yes. Because it's so heavily associated with some of the -- you know, in your face, scary, unsanitary environments that people are living in. Nobody should live in that environment. But when that's all that's there. Especially during COVID. You've got a shelter capacity decreased. We saw unsheltered homelessness more in our face because we're at home, right. And then it's grown.

A: Yeah. How do you feel about that kind of scrubbing of language?

C: Well, I think it's important. One of the things that I learned about in peer support, which really helped me with my own internalized self stigma, was person-first language. Knowing how important language was to me as a person in recovery, you know. I've been called all sorts of things. You know, "junkie," "drug addict," you know. Worse names. I don't need to go into all the details. But, you know. And then somebody telling me for the first time, "You're a person with substance use disorder." Or, you know. Really humanizing some of these experiences. And, so what I think, why it's so important, is because those labels and words and names and misconceptions can affect, internally. You know, who you are. It really transformed how I looked at myself. And how I looked at other people. And realize how rampant in our society it is to just quickly put a label on something and put it away. Cuz then you don't have to think about it anymore: "ah, the homeless. Let downtown deal with that." You know? Which, of course, we, the history of why we're seeing so much unsheltered homelessness in downtown is due to segregation and redlining, and you know, all the racial injustices that we've seen as, not only as a nation, but here locally. And then to, you know, the kind of line of like, "oh let *them* deal with that, don't bring that to our neighborhood"? Is, it's really the same thing. As it was back then. And that's really hard. To, you gotta think, this is such a deep-rooted, systemic, issue, just as racism is. And classism. And, you know, homelessness. It's all kind of part of this same big machine that kind of winds us into us and them. Or this and that. And it's a lot of labeling and stigmatizing. So, language is important.

[1.20.54]

A: Your imaging of labeling and putting away: very, very sharp. Anything else you'd wanna add about the way communities and --

C: Oh yeah, so, you know, there's those constant myths: If you build it they will come. So like if you build homelessness services, you're gonna attract more and bleh, you know.

[both talking]

C: -your homes, and Park Hill is gonna decline. No, your values are increasing probably every day [laughs]. You're gonna be okay.

A: [laughs] Did you find your experience in real estate helpful in that regard?

C: You know, no -- in a different way. In a different way. I think I look at land a lot differently than I used to look at land before. And man, just that piece of land is such a priceless commodity for us, which has been one of our biggest challenges, obviously. Finding a willing landowner, or the land, or things like that. But so those common myths are like the negative thing, you know. Safety concerns. And you know, I'm sure you're aware that in Park Hill, we live on the same campus as a preschool. We probably won't be doing that again, anecdotally. I know this is probably not gonna come out --

A: [laughs] It's gonna be a while --

C: It's gonna be a while [laughs]. Anecdotally, we won't, probably won't be doing that again.

A: Because of the push back? Or just --

C: No, just, it's actually something, it'll probably blow you away. Because we have to put additional barriers up for legally being able to operate in the same site, in the same campus as a children's center. We've had to run backgrounds for sex offenses, violent offenses. And what that does is, you know, it's just additional barriers.

A: For sure.

C: So that's why we wouldn't. Not because -- I mean, hey, we're a scrappy little organization, I think we're, we're poised and ready for almost any fight now, cuz we have definitely beaten the odds. Granted, there are a loud few in Park Hill that swear it's the worst thing ever.

A: What do you mean, a few residents who swear?

C: Yeah, a few Park Hill residents, neighborhood residents, that swear it's the worst thing ever and, you know, the smoking is impacted their children's health [both laugh]. But, we have a whole crew. The one thing about, yes, our fight with the neighborhood felt a lot bigger and heavier, but what we didn't have prior was that, like, crew of supporters. So--

A: And what do you mean, who's the crew of supporters? What do you mean?

C: Neighbors. Neighborhoods. Park Hill neighbors. That, some of the people who work in homelessness, work in the library in Park Hill, they knew the work that we were doing in the Capitol Hill sites, and we got a lot of buy-in. We actually, you know, I don't have any final numbers or anything like that, I don't know if we're ever gonna get the numbers, but there might have even been a decrease in crime because we were there. Colfax and Pearl is probably one of the most drug-trafficked corners, and we operated an SOS site there successfully for six months! Without ever having to call the cops inside the fence. We actually helped some crises outside of the fence.

A: Wow. Wow! Which, such an exciting reversal, the way, people who aren't living in the camps are looking at it, I assume. They assume the opposite.

C: Yeah, so, our fight was harder and it might have hit below the belt a few times with Park Hill, when we got sued, and all of that. But we didn't have as much support as we did now.

A: And not to be silly about this, but when we first started talking you said there was some harassment. What kind...if you're okay describing it, what was that looking like?

C: Well, um, we were having fireworks shot into the site. Which was scary. It happened on each of the board of adjustment hearing days.

A: Wow.

C: Hmm-hmm. So, and then some young kids slashed tires right on Glenco, only on that block. And they -- it felt very calculated. And I'm never gonna get proof, obviously. But there is a police file in our favor about all the evidence that we collected from that. But I have a feeling it was tied to our board of adjustments hearing, to try to show how the neighborhood was "going downhill."

A: [laughs]

C: They were nothing, they weren't folks experiencing homelessness, they weren't people from our camp. They love their spot. They're not gonna do anything to jeopardize it. It felt very, it felt like harassment.

A: Yeah. I think that probably fits the definition of harassment. Um, and kind of just shifting more towards COVID. You mentioned this a little bit, but I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on how the City of Denver responded to COVID in terms of homelessness.

C: Yeah, so, there, they kicked right in. They got a few different types of programs in place. Because of the social distancing requirements and the decrease in shelter beds, they knew they needed to activate an emergency response and they opened up two auxiliary shelters. One at the National Western, one at the Coliseum. And I think -- oh man, I used to have these numbers on deck! I don't even remember anymore!

A: Coliseum was 300 beds.

C: Yeah, I think it was 700 total between the two.

A: National Western might have been more like 600 on its own.

C: Yeah -- maybe.

A: Hundreds of people!

C: I used to have that number. I don't anymore because obviously I have a zillion more numbers in my head nowadays. So that kicked into gear. Then they implemented the activated respite protected action, so these are the motels and hotels that they started leasing up for the folks that are high risk. And then the activated respite is obviously for the folks that got sick. You know, as with any congregate-type environment, and it being found to be an airborne respiratory-type transmission, that was scary. You know, a lot of people didn't want to access shelters because of that, right. And that's kind of how we got, we were able to get that traction. Because we were providing an individualized sheltering model. I'm very proud to say that we didn't get one case of COVID. To date. And we've been able to provide access to healthcare and vaccinations for folks. So, did it seem like enough? Probably not. I'm sure there's always gonna be critics of, especially of just the environment in Denver.

[both laugh]

A: Right, we don't need to go there too much!

C: I felt like it was, you know, I also am a board member for the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, so I was really honored to be a part of that. Man, it was like, it was intense, you know. Kicking into high gear when you start thinking about an organization as large as the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, who's also now doing the auxiliary shelters and the activated respite, protective action. And, but then also trying to care for all the people that are in there, in their program. So it was, you know I'm really proud. I feel really proud to be a part of this work. Because it was really scary. It was really scary.

A: And you, you are in this position, you're on boards, where you are affecting real change. I'm wondering if, sky was the limit and you had unlimited resources, unlimited everything, you had everything you could want, what are some changes you would make in the city of Denver to better support people experiencing homelessness?

C: Well, being that I sit on their board, I feel really lucky to be a part of that. You know, I'm proud to say that the work that the strategic advisors and community organizations got together, and one of the top priorities for the Department of Housing and Stability is to reduce unsheltered homelessness by fifty percent. When I was sending in my feedback, I said, "by 75!" If I had unlimited resources and all the land and money, I would set up as many safe outdoor spaces to meet the need of the actual number of folks outside. We have 11 districts, I think in Denver, and if we had two 50% SOS's in 11 districts, it would have a space for everybody that's sleeping outside right now. Which is, what this model is, is like, in a pandemic, yes, but also...safer for the people, safer for the neighborhoods. Safer for the city. It's like a no-brainer. I mean, it's a no-brainer! That's what I would do.

A: I love it. So, Safe Outdoor Space in every neighborhood.

C: Or other, or you know, like the reason I say Safe Outdoor Space is, we can set one of these up. We can set one of these up in about three weeks.

A: Right. You're not building a building --

C: Not building a building --

A: Nor repurposing a building.

C: Yeah. You're not going through all that permitting and design and construction. And like, you know, I am part of the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, and the, it takes from conception to lease-out three years.

A: Wow.

C: I was a part of their first motel remodel. That still took a year.

A: Yeah. So. And--

C: And that's why I would do two in every district.

[1:32:34]

A: I love it.

C: It would, like eradicate unsheltered homelessness. We could provide dignity to 1200 people.

A: Across the city. Rounding up, last few questions here. How do you think your oral history -- and I know you've done a lot of speaking and sharing of your story -- how do you think either this oral history project or other ways that you've shared your story-- cuz at the beginning of our conversation, I remember you saying you could only, you kind of only found your voice after hearing. So I'd be curious to hear you speak a little bit about how, the importance of story, and what the impact you think sharing your story has.

C: Yes. So. Obviously, not everybody feels comfortable in being vulnerable. Because it takes a lot of vulnerability to speak out and talk about some of these perceived negative things in our society. Which is, you know, mental health. Substance use. And, but what sharing my story started giving me was more courage. Because each time I shared my story, instead of being met with, you know I keep thinking Game of Thrones, Shame! Shame!

[both laugh]

C: Which is typically how it felt, it was met with compassion. And empathy.

A: Khaleesi!

[both laugh]

C: It was met with the opposite most times, I mean, you know. You have to share at the appropriate places. So that, I had this well of courage that just started getting full. And replenished. So I think it's very powerful, if you feel comfortable. Like if it's detrimental to your own well being, absolutely don't. Be cognizant of your audience. Where you're at, who you're around, what's the setting. You don't wanna get vulnerable and then get met with some, you know, bad things. But. There was something about reclaiming my own power in telling my story. And as I'm building this well of course and reclaiming my power and saying "I am enough" just me, who I am, here right now, today, without all the things. You know, success looks so different to me know. You know, I shared about how success looked like money and power and prestige and things. Now, today, success is being able to make an impact on just one person's life. And now I feel, some days I'm like how am I here? But like, the scale that I'm affecting people, and helping people now, feels, it's overwhelming at times, but then it also feels absolutely right. And, like I'm right where I'm supposed to be. So the power of story and speaking and owning your truth is, is scary but also very freeing at the same time. And I think, the more I do it, the more I realize that the more it needs to happen because every day I'm coming in contact with somebody that's like thank you, thank you for sharing that with me. I've gone through something similar. This is how I feel. Being able to see people without the "seeing." Like, you know, I'm not just looking at them, their situation, what they're going through --

A: The label.

C: Yeah, that label. I'm actually seeing them. Their heart. Their soul. You know. That they're just another human being that's having a hard time. Just like I was having a hard time. And it was dark and scary and, you know.

A: And last question. If you were conducting this interview, what question would you ask that I didn't ask.

C: Whoo! You asked a lot of questions! [laughs]

A: [laughs] You've been very generous, this has been a long one!

C: I know, I was looking at all of your notes, and I was like man, I talk a lot.

A: No honestly, honestly, I want to return to so much more, but we're almost at 2 hours, so I shouldn't do that to you. But everything you're saying is so poetic and beautiful and genuine.

C: I think the one thing I would add, I guess, that's kinda at the forefront is...so, hiring folks with lived experience. They're gaining a career opportunity at the same time that they're actually able to help other people. So, not only am I helping people that are actively in the moment, I'm also helping other people find their voice and their power. I remember my mom said, Cuica, why do you wanna be a manager? You're not gonna be able to work with your people! Because it was so magical. And I realized that, I said, Mom, I'm gonna be helping more people, because I'm actually gonna be coaching other people to show up authentically how I was showing up and, you know, sharing my knowledge that I've learned to date of how to connect with people.

A: [inaudible]on the Cuica magic.

C: Cap, yeah! So, really affecting more people.

A: So really emphasizing the peer navigation.

C: All day, every day.

A: All day, every day [laughs].

C: People are so sick of me saying "we gotta hire peers!"

A: Just have it on a t-shirt! Hire Peers Now!

[both laugh]

C: For real.

A: Anything else you'd like to add?

C: That I really enjoyed this opportunity. It's really powerful. And it's cool that this is getting documented. Maybe it goes somewhere, maybe it doesn't, but --

A: Yeah, hopefully it does. Well thank you, so so much, for participating. Thank you.