

# Barbra O.



August 2, 2022



47:38

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Black Americans, Community, Culture, Education, Food, Igbo, Immigrant parents, Immigrants, Immigration, Italy, Language, Nigeria, Nigerian-Americans, Race, Racism, Students, TX - Denton, University of Houston

## SPEAKERS

Nasriya Witt, Barbra O, Barbra O.

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Nasriya Witt 00:05

Today is the 2nd of August, 2022. My name is Nasriya Witt, and I'm an oral history fellow for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I'm in Oldenburg, Germany on a Zoom call with Barbra. Barbra, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're joining from?



Barbra O. 00:25

Okay, yes. I'm Barbra Somto. I am joining from Italy, Sicily, Italy right now.



Nasriya Witt 00:37

Barbra, where were you born?



Barbra O. 00:40

I was born in Nigeria, specifically in the former capital, Abuja, Nigeria.



Nasriya Witt 00:48

Okay. And your parents are also Nigerian, right?



Barbra O. 00:53

Yes, both my mother and my father.

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N

Nasriya Witt 00:57

When did your family move to the US, and where did they move to?

B

Barbra O. 01:05

The story that's always told, I don't have the exact dates, but I've been told that we moved here October 1, 1998, which is also the date of Nigerian Independence Day, which is October 1. We came here and we moved to Texas, Denton, Texas in 1998.

N

Nasriya Witt 01:31

And what was the reason for moving? What was the story behind that?

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Barbra O. 01:37

Yes, so I've always been told that - well that the real reason was we won the visa lottery. And after researching, I learned that the formal name, the official term for it, it's the Diversity Visa Program that the United States has, and I think it still goes on today. But we won that lottery. And so of course, we were granted access into the States. But I guess the reason for even applying was that my parents wanted us to have the best possible education system available for their children. Because unfortunately, it's just not the best in Nigeria. So they really wanted us to have a better opportunity for education, and thus, better opportunity for life. So it was really about academic education from day one.

N

Nasriya Witt 02:44

And why did your family select Texas to move to?

B

Barbra O. 02:48

So I think it was mostly like, I think with most immigrants, when they come to any country, you are linked to somebody. And so my aunt, on my mom's side, was already in Denton, Texas at the time. So we had our direct link to the States, somebody that we could at least stay with while we were building our roots in the States.

N

Nasriya Witt 03:19

And what do you remember about building your roots in Texas? You were a baby, so I feel like perhaps a lot of that work was done by your parents, but what did that involve? What type of community did you have in Texas?

B

Barbra O. 03:38

Okay, I have random memories of childhood in Denton. Nothing that's super important for this conversation, just memories of being in the house or buying pizza, or things like that. But from photographs and from stories, I know that it was - I guess I'm speaking for my parents in a way, but it was a starting from the bottom type of situation. So I believe both my parents had a degree, but coming here, I don't think they were able to use those degrees.

B

Barbra O. 04:22

They had to start all over basically, is what I'm trying to say. And I'm sure that affected our childhood in some way. But I still feel like there was community because from all of the photographs, we are standing next to another family, or there's other children around me who are also Nigerian, or at least African. So I feel like that was still the core or very important or very evident in our upbringing was that although we were starting all over again, there were other people, other immigrants like us, who were around us. And I'm sure they made the process a little more comfortable.

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Nasriya Witt 05:10

How has immigration affected your upbringing? I think you mentioned how your parents had to set up their life again. But did their jobs change as you got older? And how did it affect what you chose to do with your life as well?

B

Barbra O. 05:29

How immigration affected me, I think it's mostly been a moral or a mental type of change, compared to my peers who didn't immigrate to the US. I always remember, or I'm always told of how we started. Honestly, I think it's just growing up as an immigrant, you always feel like you owe something to somebody in a good or bad way. So like I said, hearing stories of "Oh, we started from nothing and had to create resources, build community, things like that." You feel you guilty if you mess things up, if you do something wrong, if you don't appreciate things as much as you should. And so I think most of my childhood upbringing, maybe not childhood, but maybe a little older too, I maybe felt that. But at the same time, it really did make me appreciate things more than I think other peers who didn't have to immigrate didn't have to feel.

B

Barbra O. 06:52

Very simple things like, I don't know. The first thing that comes to mind is back-to-school shopping, which seems so routine and so casual, I guess, for maybe other people, but for me, it was an event. And only because I was just always reminded how important education was, where we came from. And also limited resources too, having limited resources. I wasn't always able to get everything that I wanted for school or for even personal reasons. And so those memories always stuck with me, and I think it always links back to immigration, being an immigrant, wanting these things, but not always getting everything that you want. I hope that makes sense, kind of answers the question. I hope it answers the question.

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Nasriya Witt 07:54

I think it does. What's your relationship with the country and culture of your heritage?

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Barbra O. 08:05

So the country, culture, I'm Nigerian, specifically the ethnic group is Igbo. Honestly, my connection with Nigeria is - it's bittersweet. Of course, I left when I was a baby, so I wasn't submerged in the culture one hundred percent. Maybe not even as much as my older sister who came here when she was, I believe, four years old. And you can see, I think there's a difference if you compare us. But I've always felt like I want to reach out to my country, my culture, but there's always a disconnect. It's through language. Now, my parents did try to keep the culture alive in the household. And we did regularly go to, I guess the term would be family reunion type of things, where other people of our ethnic group came together.

B

Barbra O. 09:15

So we were exposed to it in some way, but for me, it was never enough. I've always longed to know the language, know the culture, the little things about the culture, the greetings, the gestures and the mannerisms. They seem so small, but it really - those are the things that will make you feel like, "Okay, there's a distance between you and someone else or a culture." So I think for me, I've always admired it, even down to the accent, I've just always admired it. I just never felt one hundred percent fully connected, as much as I wanted to.

N

Nasriya Witt 10:06

So you mentioned that part of the disconnect is language. Do you speak a language that's spoken in Nigeria?

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Barbra O. 10:19

No, I don't unfortunately. We speak Igbo, my parents speak it. My sister can understand it, but she doesn't respond in Igbo. And I have two younger brothers who were born in America, and they do not hear it, nor do they speak it. And I cannot hear it, either. So it ended at me.

N

Nasriya Witt 10:45

Interesting. So when you say you can't hear it, just understanding it, right?

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Barbra O. 10:51

Yes, understand, yes sorry.

N

Nasriya Witt 11:02

How has your community changed over time?

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Barbra O. 11:08

How has my community changed over time. Okay, I guess as a child, I don't really have much control over community. But I was around, of course, my peers from school, and then family friends and their families. So really growing up, up until middle school, I was around a lot of other immigrants, a lot of other Africans from the apartment complex that we lived in. And that was really nice. I really enjoyed that, and I feel like that really helped with my development, I guess, just being around people like me.

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Barbra O. 11:57

But as I got older, going into high school, it really diversified in a good - it was all positive. But it was just something I definitely noticed, is I lost a lot of that community because we grow up and things happen. But I was introduced, welcomed into other communities. And then in college, that's when I really started to connect with the African-American community here, and then also, again, rebuilding my African community.

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Barbra O. 12:30

So it's been a good mix, and I always say I really appreciate growing up in Texas. We've talked about growing up in Texas with so many different people. And it becomes a norm for you to see everyone of every race and nationality. And so, no, I think I've really appreciated that about my upbringing and even the changes and all of that, is that I've been around different people, and that I'm comfortable around my people, too, if that makes sense.

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Nasriya Witt 13:06

It does. And just to quickly - well, you grew up mostly in San Antonio, right? Your family moved from Denton to San Antonio.

B

Barbra O. 13:16

Yes, yes. I don't know what year that occurred, but we went from Denton to San Antonio, and I stayed in San Antonio for up until the end of high school. And then I went to college in Houston and stayed in Houston for the end of college and left for Italy in 2021.

N

Nasriya Witt 13:41

What did you study when you were at university, and what are you studying now?

**B****Barbra O. 13:49**

So at the University of Houston, I studied public relations and marketing. And I really enjoyed that degree, the coursework and everything. And then coming to Milan, which is where I study now, I'm studying corporate communications. And in the beginning, when I was picking my degree, I actually wanted to do something like international relations or international law, and I'm pretty sure this is because of my upbringing around so many nationalities and people that I wanted that to be part of my career too. And I don't remember if it was because there wasn't a strong international program, or because there wasn't any at all. But I'd take the public relations classes because I thought it was a degree that could get me into an international sector. It could, it was a versatile degree. So that was really my purpose for that. And then also moving out of the United States. A big part of that, too, was because I wanted to have an international portfolio. So really it influenced a lot, actually, my upbringing.

**N****Nasriya Witt 15:21**

And when you were at university, were you part of any organizations?

**B****Barbra O. 15:26**

Yes, I was part of one organization called Collegiate 100, which was a professional/mentorship organization, specifically within the Black community. There may have been one or two other organizations, but they were either social organizations or a Bible study that I went to. But all of them were specifically within the Black community, or there was the Nigerian organization there too. So even in college, I was seeking to be with people like me and within my community.

**N****Nasriya Witt 16:20**

Do you identify as Nigerian-American or African-American? Do you see a difference between the two?

**B****Barbra O. 16:27**

Yes, I do see a difference. I think personally, it depends where I am, how I identify. So I do say "Black American," I guess, when I'm outside of the US, maybe. Because - okay, I'll explain. So the African-American community and the African community I think are different. I always feel like I'm right in the middle because, of course, the African community is attached to Africa. They're coming from Africa, or they're usually really still attached to their culture. Whereas African-American community has their own culture in the US in America. But it's widely influential, it's almost in everything.

**B****Barbra O. 17:26**

So I find myself around African-Americans more so than Africans sometimes. And I think that has - there's a blend of cultures with my upbringing with that. But as I was saying, it really depends where I am, because here in Italy, for example, to say I'm American doesn't feel complete. It doesn't feel like that's my entire identity, even though I still use it, but when you leave the US, your identity changes with. With that, I guess. So if I use the word Nigerian here in Italy, I am probably going to be categorized or stereotyped or there's going to be a different assumption versus American. And I want to use Nigerian, but then there's also the conflict, this internal conflict that I have of, "Okay, but culturally, I'm more American than I am Nigerian." And it gets a bit complicated internally. I think it's all inside my head with just identifying. But I say all of that just to say that it really depends where I am and how I choose to identify. But at the end of the day, I would say that I'm Nigerian-American, Black Nigerian-American.

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Nasriya Witt 18:59

That's very interesting. Thank you for sharing.

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Barbra O. 19:03

I hope I explained all of that profoundly, but it really is something that I'm still trying to identify for myself.

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Nasriya Witt 19:16

That makes a lot of sense. [Both laugh]. [Pause]. So you mentioned that you joined specific organizations at university in order to find people who had a similar upbringing as you. How did you build your community when you're away from home, or when you're away from your family?

B

Barbra O. 19:45

Yeah. How do I build my community [inaudible]? So now, I guess in university, that was the first time being away from family. So I built community through, I guess, through socializing. And, honestly, it wasn't so hard in America, because you and I know, you see so many different people so you're never in a situation where you have to actively seek out somebody who's like you or things like that. So I had roommates who were African-American, who had friends who were African, who have friends that are - so it was around me, it was already around me, I just had to pick and choose who I wanted to be friends with. And also, sometimes you don't even have to seek, it's already there for you. There's fliers of events for the Nigerian organization, or there's a barbecue going on, and African-American community is hosting it. So sometimes it was just stepping outside, and you're met by people like you.

B

Barbra O. 20:59

That's in the US, and now that I'm literally away from family and friends in Italy, it's much, much, much harder. It is such a challenge to find my community because here in Italy, perhaps

Europe, it's not the same. I feel like in the US, it's more common for there to be the Asian community, the Black community, different communities, and they stay in these groups. And you're almost expected to be in that community if you identify as that, if that makes sense. But here in Europe, or in Italy, I don't recognize that. I don't see that as much. Usually I see that mostly the Black people here are Africans, they're coming immigrating straight from Africa. So usually I see them, either it's one Black person and a group of Europeans. So with that, it becomes a bit complicated to create a community. It's almost like you're taking them away from their groups. And that's weird, that feels very weird.

B

Barbra O. 22:23

And then on top of that, language. Even when there's the odd chance that I say hi, or they acknowledge me, they say hi, there's always the language divide. And it's so, so sad every time it happens, because there's so much I want to say and ask to create a bond, to build a community. But at the end of the day - we can't say anything. So it's been very difficult, very challenging. It's been up and down type of thing with my experience outside of the US.

N

Nasriya Witt 23:08

What goals do you have for yourself?

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Barbra O. 23:14

In general?

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Nasriya Witt 23:16

This question is a bit - you can answer in general, but it's also tied to the question about education. So where do you see yourself going?

B

Barbra O. 23:29

It's a tough question, because I don't know when I'll be ever able to answer this question. I want to say, "I'm twenty-five years old, I'm young, I'm still deciding." Academically, some days I think I've reached almost to my end goal of I really wanted to get my masters. And that was really the end of that dream. That sounds so bad. But I really had only had dreams of getting my masters. And after that, like I said, working in a international sector. So I think I am accomplishing that goal. I've always been told, of course, from my parents, from peers, to seek a PhD, a doctorate program. I just am not at a point where I know what I want to do research in. But with this degree, my masters, I want to be in the international sector. I want to continue to be around different people, and also somehow create community through this education that I have.

**N****Nasriya Witt 25:02**

Thank you for sharing. So what kind of traditions and practices do you keep up with? You can answer about what you do in Italy, but also if there's more relevant things that you did in Houston, for example, then you can include those answers as well. So what kind of traditions and practices do you keep up with? And why do you continue to practice these traditions and customs?

**B****Barbra O. 25:26**

Okay. What kind of traditions and practices do I keep up with? Okay, in the US and in Italy. I have to split my brain. In the US, like I said, I think it was much easier. Traditions and practices, I don't know if I give much thought into my - there are some, but if it's a practice you don't even notice that you're maintaining these things. The first thing I think of is even though I'm not a super religious person, with the church and everything like that, that was a practice or a tradition. And in the Nigerian community, it is culture, it's religion. But I do find myself - when I do pray, I'm always reciting from things my mother has said. And I don't know, and honestly, this is stuff that she's also heard and things like that. And for me that's, in a way, like maintaining my culture, maintaining my identity. Because I just feel like it's a passing down of - I don't know, for me religion is part of that.

**B****Barbra O. 26:55**

I'm also thinking of when I was in the US, and there was the Nigerian organization, they always had events going on for celebrations. So there was the social aspect of it, of going to these parties, socializing with people as well. I'm trying to think of traditions in the now life. And then here in Italy, honestly, it's challenging, it's so challenging, because like I said, I am struggling to build that community. So I have no link to anyone or part of the culture to actually maintain my identity and my traditions. So it's really hard.

**B****Barbra O. 27:51**

And honestly the only way that I've been able to is often, it seems so silly, but with food. It seem so silly. But I've really had to seek out and find an African restaurant. I've been to West African and an Ethiopian restaurant. I remember I was just sitting there, and I felt very - not at home. I don't want to sound like those immigrant kids who are corny about it, but I really did feel at home and just eating the food. I really felt connected, I thought of my mom, I thought of my dad and the traditions that we had around food. And so that made me feel really connected. Even though it was literally just eating a plate of rice, it was a connection. So that's the best I'm doing now, and I really hope to connect.

**N****Nasriya Witt 28:57**

Can you share some of the dishes that do remind you of home and the food traditions that you just mentioned?

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Barbra O. 29:04

Yes, so jollof rice. We have fufu and egusi which is like - imagine dough and you, with your hand, dip it into a stew. Meat. There's even a way that Nigerians will cook meats, I feel like we cook it and it's like there's no fat on it. It's really - I don't know, but whenever I taste a meat that's cooked by Africans, I always laugh about it. And then this is actually a food that we don't have, but being in Italy, there's so many desserts, there's so many sweets. And in Nigerian cuisine, from my experience, we have no desserts at all. So every time I eat dessert, it actually makes me think, why don't we have something like this? Why don't we? So even the absence of a food, that makes me think of culture, my traditions.

B

Barbra O. 30:08

And then in my household, I'm sure every community has something similar. But on Sundays, or just on the weekends, I have a very strong memory of my dad who would always cook in the morning, and he would blast Fela, which is a famous Nigerian artist, and he would blast all these different Nigerian artists, a little bit of reggae, and it would just be blasting in the house. I would wake up to that, and then the smell of fish. He cooked fried fish on the weekends. Akara, which is like a type of [porridge], bread with marmalade, eggs. Of course, rice would be cooking later for lunch.

B

Barbra O. 30:59

But I just always remember it because then during while he's cooking, I would be there and asking him questions or he would just start talking about Nigeria, his memories, or just him dancing and things like that. That always felt like, "Oh, this is - I'm seeing a bit of home, and I'm tasting a bit of home. This is not - I know none of my peers have this. This feels very unique." Yeah, those memories are always probably what feels like my culture. If we're talking tradition, I think of that as well.

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Nasriya Witt 31:49

So on to questions related to race and ethnic or ethnic relations. Have you experienced unfair treatment?

B

Barbra O. 32:00

Yes.

N

Nasriya Witt 32:02

What happened? And, if you'd like to share, why do you think it happened?

B

Barbra O. 32:11

Is this pertaining - is it specific to the US or Italy? Or could this be in just general in life? Or is it in relation to being an immigrant?

N

Nasriya Witt 32:24

I think it's probably ideal if you focus on your experiences in the US, but also, it'll be nice if you can compare it to what you're experiencing right now. And is it in relation to immigration, or in general, I think I can leave that up to you.

B

Barbra O. 32:45

So in the US, I mean, the first thing that came to mind not really me personally experiencing unfair treatment because I'm an immigrant in the US, mostly because I've assimilated to American society, culture. So I have the American accent, honestly I'm African American if you look at me, you wouldn't say, "Oh, she's from Abuja, Nigeria." And so I think I've assimilated. However, I know that growing up, and even recently, there's a lot of times my mom needs help with communicating to people, because she has a thick accent.

B

Barbra O. 33:30

So even simple things like being in the drive thru, and she's trying to order something, and there's like, "What? What are you saying?" And then people get an attitude, and you can tell there's mistreatment. They aren't as polite to her, they ignore her, they look down on her, and I really, really, really hate, I hate, hate that. Because she's not doing it on purpose. It's really not her fault, and I feel for other immigrants too, because that's a reality for a lot of us. But mainly for those that didn't have the chance. It's not really a positive thing to assimilate, but didn't have the chance to assimilate and still have identifiers of where they're coming from.

B

Barbra O. 34:23

So I always notice those mistreatments, and any chance that I can to help my mom, I'll speak on the phone for her sometimes because people are rude if they hear your accent, and some people don't even try to listen, try to communicate with people who they quote-unquote "can't understand." So even to this day, there's a lot of times where I have to help her to write something or to speak to somebody because she knows that on her own, she probably can't get her message across better than her children who speak perfect first-language English and everything like that. So that's always disheartening because it just is, and it's my mom. So I always feel very protective of her.

B

Barbra O. 35:19

But also, maybe in my college experience just lightly, being around African immigrants, so people who immigrated in their twenties, we were all in our twenties in college. And just seeing how socially, sometimes even within community of the Black community, which is mixed with

African-Americans and Africans, there is some not mistreatment, but probably, I don't know if prejudice is the right word. But just knowing that, okay, they're an immigrant, they have an accent, and they're different. So it's like the jokes. I guess it's always jokes about Africans made by African-Americans or the other way around. And so although it's light-hearted, nobody is throwing slurs or assaulting or anything, there's no there's no aggression, but I think it's still a little bit of mistreatment for one another just because they haven't assimilated into your culture, or they don't know much about your culture. And that's just what happens when people mix. So that I slightly witnessed in college.

B

Barbra O. 36:50

And then moving outside from the US here in Italy, I feel it all the time. Of course, I was an immigrant in the US, but I am an "American," quote-unquote. But here in Italy, I am an immigrant. Finally I am somebody who's coming from another country. You can see it, you can hear it. I step into a room, and I'm not from here. So I now feel like a true immigrant. Although I don't think I've gotten bad treatment, especially compared to maybe my parents, because being from America is not really seen as - there's some bias, but people will praise you because you speak English, you are native tongue, you're this and that. However, when I'm doing my permesso, my residency application, or dealing with authorities, I always feel like at first if I don't speak, there's they probably group me in the box with the other African immigrants. And then I also notice the change when I present my American passport, I start speaking, or even if I'm dressed different, I do notice that just change body language or expression.

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Nasriya Witt 38:19

So it cut off when you were discussing how when you present your American passport and stuff, the attitude changes. So we were in the middle of that. So I think maybe you can pick it up where you mentioned that say you're dealing with authorities, from there on.

B

Barbra O. 38:40

No, I believe I cut off my thought there. I think the last thing I said was "and that's my experience," and I meant to end it there. But yeah, like I said, you notice that shift when - or I notice that shift when I actually speak, and I'm fortunate enough to emigrate - in the situation in Italy - to emigrate from a country like America, where people straighten up when you when you say, "Oh, I'm American," versus if I said, "Oh, I'm from Nigeria," I'm sure they would group me with the other immigrants here. It's very, very sad. It's very unfortunate, actually. And I hate even saying it, because I do recognize that, yes, that is a privilege, but I hate that I have that, and other immigrants do not have that. I don't like that when I open my mouth, I get that I will be treated differently, because I want that for other African immigrants who are coming. It shouldn't be that just from my voice, or I was lucky enough to immigrate to the US. But that changes my my relationships with everyone that I come in contact with. So it's always really sad for me to be in that position.

N

Nasriya Witt 40:15

Have your views about living in the United States changed at all? If so, how?

B

Barbra O. 40:22

Have my views about living in the United States changed? A little bit, yes. I haven't been back to the US since last September, so I really have nothing to compare it. I mean, I have my before Italy life, and then I have my Italy life. I would love to go back to really make a comparison. But no, I often think about life in the US as a Black woman, immigrant, and then also versus Italy, because that's just how I have to look at life now. And I do make comparisons, and I am now thinking, "Will I ever come back?" and, "Do I want to continue that life that I had there?" I like the US for just the reason I keep saying is that there's community there. There's every type of community there, which I do not have here in Italy, and I'm sure, in Europe, it's very similar across Europe.

B

Barbra O. 41:43

That is honestly the number one thing about America, the US, that I think is unique about the country, that I absolutely appreciate about living in the US. And I want to be around people who also grew up like that, too. So for me a lot of times everybody says, "Oh, Europe was so great to be in and Italy is so cute. And I get my cute Instagram pictures and everything." But all of that weighed against community. And sometimes I think I want to go back to the US, because I'm just the type of person who needs that. I need to be around people who are like me, who are different than me, and who also grew up with this. It's not new to them, it's part of their identity as well. I'm realizing now that is so important for me. So I don't have my final verdict on that, but I do think about it often. And out of everything about living in the US, good and bad, that's the most prominent thing that I can think of when it comes to life there.

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Nasriya Witt 43:10

So, this other question, if you have an opinion, feel free to answer. How do you feel about the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and its impact on Texas?

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Barbra O. 43:26

I'm not fully educated on the act. If I'm not mistaken, it removed the limits on the number of immigrants coming to the US or to Texas.

N

Nasriya Witt 43:42

So it allowed for the creation of communities of various non-European backgrounds within the US, and it also allowed for family migration. So for people to be able to bring their extended family with them.

B

Barbra O. 44:00

Okay. So because I'm not fully educated, but just from reading on that and what you explained, obviously I'm grateful for it, because I'm positive that had a an effect on my family's immigration, and so many other people as well. And perhaps that also had a great effect on the communities and demographics of people in Texas, and in the US, as well. Just the increase of immigration because of that, so I'm going to stop. Because that's the most I know about it.

N

Nasriya Witt 44:56

Perfect honestly, perfect. And so the last question, if you could share something with people in the future or with the rest of the world, what would it be? What is the message that you have for people?

B

Barbra O. 45:13

I would say to, as cliché as it sounds, but venture out. Go. If you can leave your city, leave your state, leave your country. Be around people who are not like you, be around people who are like you. Really, I just feel like, the more you are exposed to these types of experiences and things like that, or just because my experience as an immigrant and being around so many different people and cultures. I feel like it's made me more sensitive, I guess, to things that are occurring in the world. Not saying that I have the best perspective of everything that's going on in the world, but I really do feel like that. I wouldn't change anything about me being an immigrant, I really, really appreciate that about me, and I would want others to understand what that's like. I don't mean that everyone should become an immigrant and go to someone's country and live there just for fun, just to get an experience and go back or whatever. But I think you should be around people who can share a different story than yours because I really do think it adds on to your life and makes your story a little richer and, like I said, more sensitive to things, people, events that happen.

N

Nasriya Witt 46:46

That's really beautiful. Thank you. So if there isn't anything else you'd like to add, I'd like to go ahead and stop the recording. Thank you Barbra.

B

Barbra O. 47:34

Thank you.