

An Interview with
Estrella Cruz-Curoe

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

14 May 2015

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Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri
Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 36

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PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

- Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I am Estrella Oresti Cruz-Curoe.
- Blanche Touhill: Talk about your early life: your mother; your father; you grandparents; your cousins; your friends and your neighborhood; how did you play; your brothers and sisters, and who in that group said to you, "You have ability and I think you'd do very well in life in various ways." So just talk in general about your life.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I was born in Cuba and I was born actually in Santiago, Cuba but I remember Havana, I actually remember Havana and Santiago, both. I believe my parents moved to Havana when I was about three years old so I really have very fond memories of my childhood. It was happy as far as I remember. We played a lot with neighbors, with each other, my sisters, with cousins, we did a lot with family. It was just a normal childhood, I thought, very nice. I have very fond memories of those days.
- Blanche Touhill: Did your grandparents live near you or your cousins or your uncles or aunts?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: My grandparents lived in Santiago and we did visit them every summer. We would spend summers with our grandparents in Santiago and those were very memorable. I remember really having a wonderful time. I looked forward to it. The one thing I remember the most is the carnivals. It was a three-day carnival and it went right in front of my grandparents' house so we didn't have to go anywhere. We went to the rooftop and we would watch it go by. It was fabulous. So we had lots of cousins there, lots of cousins in Havana as well. It was just normal. It was just things you do and family was very much a part of it. They would come and visit all the time. Every Sunday we would have an uncle or somebody stop by. I remember they would bring little cakes for us every Sunday.
- Blanche Touhill: For the children?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, there was always a treat for us, something going on. It was just very nice.

Blanche Touhill: So then you went to elementary school in Havana?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I did.

Blanche Touhill: And describe that.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: We went to Sacred Heart school in Havana. I believe the school was fairly new. I understand it was fairly new. I remember it being very big. Of course, I was real little so everything was big for me then. It was delightful. Again, I have fond memories of that. The only negative thing I had about that is that they served lunch family style and during Lent, they would serve us ochre, every Friday. It was ochre and we had to eat a spoonful of ochre, could not leave the table until we ate it and fast forwarding to today, I will not touch ochre.

Blanche Touhill: Are your sisters older than you?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I have two older, one younger.

Blanche Touhill: So you were in the middle?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I was a middle child, yes.

Blanche Touhill: And how much older were your sisters?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oldest sister is five years older; then another, three years older, and the youngest is a year-and-a-half.

Blanche Touhill: So you can recall your days as a child together?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, we actually played a lot together. Inside the house, sometimes we would...actually, we would play mass.

Blanche Touhill: Of course you would play mass.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: This is when our older sisters would abuse the two younger sisters and, of course, we were always the ones in the pews.

Blanche Touhill: Kneeling?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Kneeling and we had lots of communion.

Blanche Touhill: And they were in charge, they were in charge...

- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, absolutely.
- Blanche Touhill: It was a normal household, yes.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you speak English at that time?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: No, but we were taught English in school so at school they would teach us French and English. Now, of course, I was young so it was very basic.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, but you had the beginnings?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, uh-huh.
- Blanche Touhill: So the revolution came and you stayed in Havana for a while or did you go back to Santiago when the troubles came?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: No, we were in Havana and, again, I was young. I knew at some point...actually, I remember the day Castro came to power. That was January 1st, 1959, and there was total jubilation in the country. There was jubilant. I had never seen my mother cry so...my mom wasn't a drinker. I saw her drink. It was incredible. I knew something very good had happened. It was a joyous time and then from there we went to, all of a sudden, understanding that, hmm, okay, things are different. So it was a drastic change. That was over a period of two years. We left in '61 and I would say it's the last year, in particular, that there was some fear involved.
- Blanche Touhill: That somebody might be arrested or killed or hurt?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, on all counts. At first you could hear bombings every now and then. I'm not quite sure what they were. Then you had what they called a G2 and we, as children, were told, "Don't say anything if anyone asks you a question. Just say you don't know." So you knew something wasn't good and that brought fear: to say the wrong thing; to endanger your family. My mom was followed for a long time and it was visible. Even a child could understand that she was being followed. That was very frightful.
- Blanche Touhill: What did your father and mother do? Was your mother a stay-at-home mom?

- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: My mom volunteered. She volunteered at a hospital. My dad was in film editing and so they weren't political figures by any means and, yeah, things had changed.
- Blanche Touhill: And the G2, is that a secret service?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And how was food? Was the food plentiful or cut back?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was rationed. It began to be rationed and you saw lines all the time. That's another thing I won't do, is wait in line very long for anything. But you saw lines. People would actually start making a line the night before for a chicken and things like that. We left right when all these changes were occurring.
- Blanche Touhill: And how did you get out? You flew out?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: So you were able to get passage out?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: That was an interesting time. I wish my mom were here because she would explain it a little better but it was an interesting situation, as I understand it. My father left in 1960. He left a year before we did.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, that must have been a hard parting?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I don't know if it was hard. It was quick. He left very quickly and he became involved with the Bay of Pigs here on this side. So when that failed, McNamara granted visas to those who were involved, for the families of those who were in the invasion. So that's how we got out.
- Blanche Touhill: But your father didn't get arrested or anything?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: There were three ships. He was in the ship that did not land. They had been radioed by the other captain saying, "Don't land."
- Blanche Touhill: So it was just a fluke that he didn't get captured?

- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was luck, I guess, that that ship had not reached its destination yet and they were stopped by those who had already reached there and said, "Don't do this. This is not..." ...
- Blanche Touhill: It's not going to work.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Exactly.
- Blanche Touhill: Because many of those men spent a long time in the prisons.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: In jail, yes, they did, and then they got freed. The U.S., I believe, paid a ransom for them, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And then you were able to make the reservation on the airlines to get out?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Then, what my mom got was a visa for all of us so we came with a visa.
- Blanche Touhill: But Castro didn't stop you? Nobody stopped you?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Do you know, this is where it gets interesting because it was, I understand, the official stance was, if you want to leave, leave.
- Blanche Touhill: I see, yes.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Where it got a little tricky was with the secret service, G2, because they were there to find out if you were pro or anti the Castro government, things like that, and I believe my mom was under watch because my dad had left so quickly and so that's when things got tricky. We didn't pack at home. We packed at a friend's house and we would just go with bags and take whatever. We'd walk to this friend's house, my mom's friend who was single and she figured she had little to lose. People did amazing things.
- Blanche Touhill: So you carried slowly things over to your friend's house.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Correct.
- Blanche Touhill: And then you eventually carried the suitcases over, packed and left?

- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Well, the suitcases were not at our house. They were not with us. They were at the friend's house.
- Blanche Touhill: I see. So nobody could say they walked out of their house with a suitcase.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Correct, and we left in July which would have been time to go to Santiago and all the neighbors did know that we did that.
- Blanche Touhill: So if the house was empty, they wouldn't worry?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Well, we walked out with our pillows. We all came with our pillows.
- Blanche Touhill: To Santiago?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: No, to the United States. So we went to the airport, we each carried our pillows and we told everybody we were going to Santiago. My mom then had a cab driver that she trusted pick her up as if she was going to her regular volunteer work at the hospital and instead came, so we came separate.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, my, that was courageous of you all.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Well, my grandparents did come in from Santiago for that and they were with us at the airport.
- Blanche Touhill: But they didn't go with you?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: No, they couldn't. They didn't have...
- Blanche Touhill: ...the visa. Well, that must have been a terrible parting. You were so anxious to get on or what?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Actually, I think I was kind of excited. I think for us it was a...we didn't realize it would be for the rest of our lives. I do remember, the cab driver that took us to the airport, saying that...when we passed this one memorial, I believe it was Hussein Mati memorial...for some reason this stuck with me...and he said, "Take a good look at that. It may be the last time," and I thought, hmm, but didn't give it any great thought. We just left. The airport part was scary because my mom was late and we weren't sure if anything had happened to her.

Blanche Touhill: But you were still with your grandparents?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes. We actually spent the night at the airport hotel with my grandparents.

Blanche Touhill: And then your mother came that night or the next day?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: The next day.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my. That was scary then?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, so we met up at the airport.

Blanche Touhill: Oh!

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, the things you do.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, the things you do. So, were you able to take a doll or a toy?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: We had a pillow. I think we may have.

Blanche Touhill: Of course, when you're 10, you don't have as many dolls.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, we had lots of dolls. We had a lot of dolls but I don't remember if we brought one or not. I remember the pillows for some reason. Then we were each allowed one suitcase and no new clothes; nothing could be new. So I think what my mom did is she bought things and then washed them.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, of course she did.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: And then we brought them and that was the beginning. She came with ten cents on her.

Blanche Touhill: Ten cents!

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: For a phone call. They allowed ten cents for a phone call.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you got to the other side.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that fascinating.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, what courage!

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: My mom was very courageous.

Blanche Touhill: So, she dialed, then she got off the airplane and dialed or was your father there?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: He was here, yeah, and he picked us up and then we went to a friend of his, someone an American actually, and I remember they had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I don't think any of us ate it. It was just too different. We didn't care for the peanut butter and jelly. I remember that at the time and then they gave us a banana and the banana tasted...it was different. You know, that was the first realization: boy, I don't know if I can survive the food!

Blanche Touhill: And your father had an apartment or something set aside?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And did he have a job by that time?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: You know, I couldn't tell you for sure.

Blanche Touhill: It was more like a freelancer?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: He was a free spirit, to say the least, very different from my mom, very different personalities, very different people. He was born to a family of privilege and when we came here, he just...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, it was too hard?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, he was too free spirited, I guess you could say and he just couldn't grab the bull by the horns and figure, this is different, a different life.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you know, it's culture shock. There is such a thing as culture shock and we all go through it when we go to a different culture and find we have to live there.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm, yeah, so my mom was the...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, the person who kept the family together?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: And did she get a job?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah. She was a social worker and, yeah, she learned English. She started walking to school so that she could learn English. I believe her first job was with Catholic Charities in Miami.

Blanche Touhill: Well, did Catholic Charities help out the Cuban refugees?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Good question.

Blanche Touhill: Somewhat?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Not us personally, other than, my mom was an employee but it was Catholic Charities in Miami that did the Peter Pan program and so my mom was involved with that.

Blanche Touhill: What is the Peter Pan project?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was kids that were...the parents in Cuba would take their kids, I believe, to the embassy, to the American Embassy so that their kids would come to the United States.

Blanche Touhill: Could get out?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, and could get out and then with expecting to reunite the family. So, I don't know, there were several hundred...I would say six, seven hundred kids that came by themselves. If they had any family here, they would stay with that family. If they didn't, there were families that volunteered...

Blanche Touhill: ...to take them.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: ...to take them in, treat them like family. They could not be foster children and they could not be adopted. Those were two conditions. Well, there was a third condition: if there were siblings, they couldn't be split. They had to be together.

Blanche Touhill: They had to be together?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: They had to be together.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: So, I believe the success rate, as far as reunited families, was something like 98%.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness!

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was a very successful program, and again, I wish my mom were here to talk about it because she was very proud of that. She was very involved with that through Catholic Charities. That was a big thing they did. So, yes, Catholic Charities did help the Cubans in that regard.

Blanche Touhill: Did the Cuban population in Miami stick together?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Uh-huh.

Blanche Touhill: They did?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: So they formed sort of a community of their own?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Still there.

Blanche Touhill: Still there?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: So they would have the restaurants and the schools. Did they go to the public schools or did they go to the Catholic schools?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Some did; some didn't. The Sacred Heart nuns...

Blanche Touhill: Were they in Miami?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: They opened a school in Miami.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, for the Cuban refugees?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: So that we could continue our education there, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that fascinating!

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Did the nuns get out from Cuba?

- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, they closed the school.
- Blanche Touhill: They closed the school and so the nuns got out. And then did some of those nuns come to Miami and serve in the school or were those other Sacred Heart nuns?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Those were other Sacred Heart nuns.
- Blanche Touhill: That's a wonderful story.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: I've been to Sacred Heart schools so I know they have a certain love and a certain routine and so they just brought that, so that would be familiar to you and your sisters?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Very much so, and we were one of the fortunate ones. The school was very small when they opened it. Very few of us got in. We happened to be one of them. We were very, very fortunate.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: To have been able to go there, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: And did they have an elementary and secondary school, both?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: Did they have a college, by any chance?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: No. Let's see, they opened, I guess, in 1963 or so. I don't remember exactly, right in there.
- Blanche Touhill: See, I think that's a remarkable thing that they did.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I agree. The Hispanic community, the Cuban community in Miami is incredibly grateful to them. We all have a very special place for them, yeah, and they are very, very, very successful in Miami.
- Blanche Touhill: You know, I taught at Maryville, one of my first jobs when I was starting the teaching profession and it was a Sacred Heart school and one of the nuns was from Cuba and she always said...I didn't know her very well, but she said the one thing she missed from Cuba to the United States, and particularly to St. Louis, was the

fact that in Cuba everybody lived outdoors a lot and that when you come to the Midwest, it's cold; it's hot, and I guess Cuba is hot too, now that I think about it.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It is but it's a different heat. You know, it's an island so you've got the breezes. We didn't have the air conditioning so that probably brought everyone outside a little bit more. You had a lot of houses that were built around atriums so it was all, the outdoors was there, yeah, definitely. I do think people were outside a lot more. You would see people outside all the time.

Blanche Touhill: Was there some teacher that said to you at some point, "You're a brave little girl and you'll be all right in life"?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I've had lots of fabulous teachers. I'm not quite sure that there is one in particular. I think...I call it "the universe." The universe, in general, was very kind to me, both as a child, all the way through, and even to today, the universe is very kind to me but I do remember a nun in 8th grade, she was a St. Joseph's nun and I was struggling with the language at that time and we were taking exams to get to high school and things like that and I was not very confident at all and the results had come in and I didn't even want to know, I was so concerned and she pulled me aside and she says, "What are you talking about? You did great."

Blanche Touhill: Oh, wonderful.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: And she was very complimentary and, "Yes, you can do whatever."

Blanche Touhill: So you got a perspective of where you were in relationship to the other girls?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Right, right, although I didn't ask how the other girls did. I just know I got to high school.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, but the fact she said you did great implies that you probably did better than some of the other girls in the class.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Right, yes, I think that's what she was trying to say.

- Blanche Touhill: Now, when you went to school in Miami, with the Sacred Heart nuns, were the lessons in Spanish or in English?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: English. In fact, they wouldn't let us speak Spanish. We would get "detention" if we spoke Spanish. There were very few of us. My class was 21 and 4 of us were Cuban; the rest were not.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, I see, okay.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: So, yeah, I learned, slowly but surely, I learned.
- Blanche Touhill: You took your mother as your role model then?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: And what did you learn from her?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, goodness! She would be a tough act to follow. She was very strong. She passed away yesterday, actually, five years ago, yesterday.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, I'm sorry.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: No, no, it happens; it's part of life. She was an extraordinarily strong, bright, wise person, not easy to have as a parent, especially when you're young because she was very much a disciplinarian and expecting great things from us. She was a perfectionist, all these things, it was hard to meet her...get to her level, her expectations. But once you get past that, once you understand where she's coming from, it was great. I actually got closer to her as I got older, understood her better. I would call her for almost anything, you know, why this or why that or what do you think of this.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you speak to her in Spanish or English?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Spanish, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Because you had more understanding of each other with the language?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Well, it was easier for her. She spoke English but it was easier for her, I think, and she insisted, she kept saying, "If you're going to

speak Spanish, speak Spanish.” She didn’t want the Spanglish so she would constantly be correcting me and things like that so I could keep it. Yeah, I did speak to her in Spanish and my aunts.

Blanche Touhill: And did your aunts make it over here too?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Actually, everybody did.

Blanche Touhill: Everybody did?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Except for...now, again, as family goes, in the Cuban culture, second cousins still are very much the inner part of the family. So we had some, I guess they would be second cousins, who stayed behind but they stayed behind voluntarily. I would love to see what happened to them or, I would love to see them again. I think I have an idea that they did well in their own way there. I have a first cousin, my mom’s sister’s daughter, who also stayed behind with my mom’s sister and my mom’s dad. Now, my mom’s dad was a Spaniard and his position was, “I already left one country. I’m not leaving another” and so he chose to stay behind.

Blanche Touhill: And so his wife and his daughter stayed with him?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Right, and granddaughter, who would be my first cousin, yes. I have no idea how this...I hear she’s a doctor and a director at a hospital in Santiago but that’s all I know. There’s been no real communication. Those are parts of life that you would like to reconnect with.

Blanche Touhill: Would you like to go back to Cuba and visit?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I would love to visit, yes, I would.

Blanche Touhill: But you’re not interested in going back to live there?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: My family is here. Yeah, I wouldn’t mind a second home there but if not, that’s okay, but I would like to...

Blanche Touhill: ...be able to go back and forth and have a relationship with your cousins?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Indeed, yes, I would love to reintroduce ourselves and get those missing pieces back together again. It would be wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get to St. Louis?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I zigzagged my way here, Miami first, graduated from high school, again, thanks to the Sacred Heart nuns I got a scholarship to go to Barat College in Chicago.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, into the cold!

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Into the cold. My mom gave me six months. I was there 20 years. So I was in Chicago. I actually loved Chicago. It was a very good place. It was good to me and for me, a very good place. It helped make me who I am today.

Blanche Touhill: Why is that?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Well, for starters, it was the first time I was on my own. The friends I had made and the college I had attended had been very welcoming and very supportive. It gave me the confidence to stay on my own and so I did.

Blanche Touhill: What was your major?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Psychology and sociology.

Blanche Touhill: Those are actually very good subjects for life.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, they don't hurt to have something there, yes.

Blanche Touhill: No, they don't. They're hard to get a job though when you graduate with them. So what did you do?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I ended up working for All-State and became an adjuster, was supposed to last, like, five years. I was there 15 years but, again, things worked out well for me there.

Blanche Touhill: Did you rise in the organization?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I did. Of course, I never got to...I guess when I left, I would have been called maybe a very junior executive.

Blanche Touhill: But you were on the path?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, I would say I was.

Blanche Touhill: So then, why did you leave?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Because I fell in love and I didn't think it was going to be the end of a career, per se. Those are things you learn, hard lessons you learn as a woman, that back then, if you left a career, that was it. You get one shot at it. So anyway, Mike was with MetLife and they transferred him to Kansas City. He had moved to Chicago once before to make sure our relationship, there was something there. So I felt I owed him. You know, it was fair. Little did I know the results would be very different. So anyway, I ended up in Kansas City with him totally expecting my career to continue, if not with All-State, somewhere else. It was not meant to be and I had a brand new, shiny MBA from Kellogg.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my, which is not easy to get. That's a very strenuous school.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was a wonderful school. It gets your adrenaline going. That was a fabulous experience.

Blanche Touhill: And that's Northwestern?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that was a fabulous experience.

Blanche Touhill: And you got it at night?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I had the executive MBA.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, so you could go at...

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was every weekend, every other Friday, that sort of thing, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and your company sponsored you, no doubt?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, yes, they did.

Blanche Touhill: So they let you off to do that?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, they did.

Blanche Touhill: So then, you were in the management track?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, I was.

Blanche Touhill: How did you like Kansas City?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Well, it was a culture shock for me.

Blanche Touhill: What year was Kansas City? What decade did you get there?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was December of '89 when I got there, so let's say, 1990 on. Kansas City...you know, Blanche, it was a culture shock to a great extent.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it's very different than Chicago.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, yes.

Blanche Touhill: And Miami, because Miami is more international.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, and Miami is more eastern than...

Blanche Touhill: It is more eastern, yes.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It's considered East Coast.

Blanche Touhill: And Chicago is the big Midwestern town. That's how I like to describe it.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Actually, I thought I was staying in the Midwest and then I got to Kansas City and people are like, "No, no, no, this is more the Southwest." I'm like, "Really?" There was some culture shock there. It took me a long time, Blanche.

Blanche Touhill: Then how did you get to St. Louis?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was through, again, Mike.

Blanche Touhill: He was transferred?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: He was early retired where he was at and ended up here in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: Was he from St. Louis?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: He's from Iowa, a farm boy from Iowa.

Blanche Touhill: Then how did he choose St. Louis?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I don't think he chose St. Louis. St. Louis chose him at the time. It was something that he thought, this is where he ended up getting the next...

Blanche Touhill: ...big job?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Correct. So I tagged along and here I am.

Blanche Touhill: You brought your children?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, definitely.

Blanche Touhill: Where were your children born, in Chicago or Kansas City?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Kansas City.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, that's right, because you got married and went to Kansas City, that's right.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Right. So I became what I never thought I would be.

Blanche Touhill: A stay-at-home mom?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I had no clue how to do that. My mom was not a stay-at-home person so I had no clue how to do that and I did the best I could. God knows, I hope I did okay. I was not the cookie baker or anything like that.

Blanche Touhill: Now, there's no Sacred Heart school in Kansas City, is there?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: You know, Kansas City...I asked my mom this wisdom, why I had such a rough time in Kansas City at first, because toward the end, like everything else, you just adjust, and this was when we knew we were coming to St. Louis, and by the way, she was thrilled about St. Louis because of the Sacred Heart connection and she said it was because...and you touched on it, Blanche...she said Kansas City didn't have anyone or anything that made me me. I found that very interesting and it hit home.

Blanche Touhill: So she understood you?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It hit home as soon as she...the beans were born in Kansas City and the reason they were born, I think...

Blanche Touhill: Really? You had time.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I had the time.

- Blanche Touhill: Oh, and you wanted your own culture. You wanted your original culture?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I was looking for something that tied me to something and that was it.
- Blanche Touhill: And what do you call your company?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It's called Del Carmen. It actually is my middle name that I gave up when I married Mike so that I wouldn't have so many last names because I wanted to keep my maiden name. So that's why I have the "Cruz-Curoe," but "Del Carmen" just was too much so I let go of it when I got married and then, when the beans came up, I'm like, why not my middle name and I can be put together like Humpty Dumpty.
- Blanche Touhill: How did you make the recipe? Did you try it again and again and again?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I did. There was a flavor I was looking for and the girls...there's a write-up that one of the girls did for college and it was precisely about this because I tried it over and over again and they ate more beans. Our neighbors ate beans. Their friends at school ate beans. Everybody ate beans and I just kept looking for...and it wasn't right and of course, beans is a slow food so it would take days before you get the next batch and it took me two years, really to develop the recipe and be satisfied.
- Blanche Touhill: And how did you get all the herbs and things that you put in it or the ingredients? Were they all available in Kansas City?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, they're available everywhere. They're very mainstream herbs and spices, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Talk about your business. So you come to St. Louis with your secret recipe?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: And you convinced your husband that you were going into business?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mike is a kind, beautiful person and he has been very tolerant of me through the years. I know I have not been the easiest person in many ways and the beans being one of them. He kind of just let me do my thing and, as long as he was letting me, I was going and at first, I can say, there wasn't much support from him. I was getting it elsewhere.

Blanche Touhill: Now, who was supporting you from elsewhere?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oklahoma State University. I went there and they actually taught me how to commercialize the product and introduce me to the equipment and talked about the industry to me. They were very encouraging.

Blanche Touhill: Was that their extension division or their school of agriculture?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Their food and ag.

Blanche Touhill: Really?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm, yeah, they took me in. They've been fabulous. They're still mentors on a technical level, yeah. They're very good.

Blanche Touhill: How did your daughters react?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: To the beans?

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, to the beans? Well, to your going into business?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: You know, they were real little when I started this so they came to Oklahoma with me several times. I would get them in the car early in the morning, we'd leave, like, at 4:00 in the morning and come back the next day. I would stay there. So they experienced this whole process. They, as children, of course, thought, "Okay, now you have the recipe so now you're at the store and then you sell" and when they didn't see that happening, they're like, "Aren't you supposed to be..." ...if they've learned anything from this, it's the time and perseverance that it takes to develop anything. It's not something that happens overnight. I can honestly say somewhere along the line I think they may have thought, "This is never going to happen" because it has taken so long. It really has been a 12-

year process and it's been longer, more, because we moved, it was shelved for a while. Things happen, life happens, is what it is.

Blanche Touhill:

Yes, life happens.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe:

So they lost a little but they were right in there. They asked questions all the time. They are bean eaters to this day.

Blanche Touhill:

Do you think any of them will eventually come in the business?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe:

I think that depends on what happens to the beans. Someone asked, one of my daughters, about a year ago, "Well, are you ready to go into business if she...da da da" and I think if they saw it as a viable business, there would be interest.

Blanche Touhill:

Yes, and a place for them?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe:

Yeah, I think there would be interest in that but at this point, you know, they need to do their thing.

Blanche Touhill:

Did they take business degrees?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe:

Communications. We should be very well communicated.

Blanche Touhill:

Well, they should be able to market your product then.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe:

Oh, definitely, they should be able to, yes. They both are communications majors, one PR, the oldest one in public relations. She's both, public relations and...

Blanche Touhill:

Is she St. Louis?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe:

She is in Milwaukee.

Blanche Touhill:

Oh, Milwaukee. You certainly run the Midwest, don't you, from Chicago to Milwaukee to Kansas City to St. Louis?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe:

Well, they wanted to go away to college.

Blanche Touhill:

Where did she go?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe:

Marquette, and we gave them a radius basically.

Blanche Touhill:

And where did the other girl go?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Marquette also, both Marquette girls.

Blanche Touhill: Where does she live now?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: She is going to be a senior at Marquette next year.

Blanche Touhill: And is she business as well?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: She's communications.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, they're both communications? Oh, my. And where does the older girl work?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: She works...really, it's called Good Karma Brands. It's someone who owns several businesses and so he's a small entrepreneur who runs several businesses.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, she'll learn from him?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: And he's been very good to her. She loves working there so she's getting some very good experience from some very good people.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful. Did they go to the Sacred Heart schools here?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: They went to Villa. There was no choice in the matter.

Blanche Touhill: Did they like it?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was tough for Katherine because she came in...she's the oldest...she came in as a sophomore.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, so the friendships were made, yes.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was rough.

Blanche Touhill: That is hard, yeah.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It was really rough.

Blanche Touhill: Especially at that age.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, very, very, very rough for her. Claire loved it. It was a completely different thing. Claire went to Pillar so she already...you know, it was a different...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and then some of the girls from Pillar went to Villa?

- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, and it was just a completely different age.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, she went in the 8th grade or something, 7th or 8th grade?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: She went to Villa in the 9th grade but she already knew some girls.
- Blanche Touhill: That's what I'm saying...from Pillar?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: From Pillar and some Pillar girls knew Villa girls so it was...
- Blanche Touhill: ...a piece of cake.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, for Claire it was a much easier transition. For Katherine, it was...I don't know how many times we heard, "You've ruined my life" and Mike and I would look at each other, "What have we done?" But she's doing fine. Looking back, I think she...she actually told me about three years ago that she wishes she had not fought the move to St. Louis as much as she did. So she's very smart; she's very bright and I think she gets it.
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah. Did your mother visit you in Chicago and Kansas City and St. Louis or was she able to do that?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, she did. She visited mostly Kansas City and St. Louis because Chicago, she was working while I was in Chicago. My mom worked until she was 83.
- Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful, in this social work?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Social worker.
- Blanche Touhill: They do such good work.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: She loved what she did and it's the type of industry that you have to love what you do.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: And she loved what she did and, from what I understand, she was very good at it and she was very highly respected in her field.
- Blanche Touhill: What made you what you are today?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, God, I don't know, the universe?

Blanche Touhill: Maybe it is the universe.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I think so.

Blanche Touhill: And now your product is all over St. Louis?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I wish it were all over but we're getting there, slowly but surely.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I know you're in Tower Grove Park and I assume you're in other farmers' markets or not?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, Schlafly and Webster Groves and then we are in some stores.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I know you're in the Ladue market.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Right.

Blanche Touhill: And you're in Whole Foods?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Town and Country right now and then Lucky's Market in Ellisville and then on Morgan Ford we have...what's the name of that...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, is that that specialty store, that Harvest or something...

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Local Harvest grocery. We have Nutrition Stop and St. Charles carries us. There's a few...Freddy's in Webster.

Blanche Touhill: Which one in Webster?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Freddy's Market in Webster Groves. Yeah, through customers, they tell us, "You know, you should try this; you should go here; you should..."...it's really been through the customers. They've been great to us.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, I love that Tower Grove Market, I have to tell you.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I do, too.

Blanche Touhill: I have learned so much about food by going there because you can try something that's different.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: And food is changing. It's one of those things that is really changing. How we eat is going to be very different. It's transitioning, I guess.

- Blanche Touhill: To what?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: First of all, we know more about food so we know more of what's good for us and what isn't good for us. We begin with that because there were things we thought were good for us that turned out not to be so good for us so that shift has taken place.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, you're in a healthy category.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes. See, I didn't know beans were healthy until I started the business. I had no clue. I just knew I liked them. I had no clue they were healthy. When I read they were a super food, I remember waking up Mike at 2:00 o'clock in the morning as I was doing my research, saying, "Did you know they were healthy?"
- Blanche Touhill: Let me ask my question: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life be like?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I think of my mom when I think of 50 years earlier. Her life was not smooth and it was partially because she was a...she was probably one of the first feminists which, by today's standards, wouldn't cut it but back then...
- Blanche Touhill: `No, but being the first, she moved forward. She moved the women forward.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: She always took positions that were greater than her, it seemed. First it was women, for women, and of course she had four daughters so even more reason, the second one and then when she became older, she was for senior citizens. She had some pressure to retire and she was alone. It wasn't like she had a husband to go travel with or whatever and she didn't want to and she fought for that.
- Blanche Touhill: To stay employed?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Mm-hmm, and she fought for that, not just for herself but for senior citizens, in general.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, for senior men and women?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, she took that on, head on and did very well with that. So, it depends. If I had taken the route of being the stay-at-home mom,

raising children, I think that could have been one avenue. If I would have taken the avenue of a career, that would have been a lot more difficult. That would have taken some strength and courage and a lot of support from somewhere, from the universe.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, from the universe.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: To help you get through because it's messages that you get that give you that strength. For me, it's been always more than one person. It seems to be getting the message...

Blanche Touhill: Saying keep going, keep going?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, exactly, and so you do, but for the firsts of anything, it's a challenging road that is commendable, absolutely commendable.

Blanche Touhill: I'm not trying to push you but do you want to comment on the American policy today of opening Cuba?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I personally think it's a very good thing. I know that a lot of pain and hurt and bad things happened 50+ years ago but I believe, in order to progress, we need to leave the past where it belongs and not forget about it but we need to move forward. I think we need to be able to forgive at some point. I just don't want to stand still. I'll one of these, my cup is half full so I really do believe that we need to explore the world of loving each other more rather than firing at each other.

Blanche Touhill: You know, that's the Sacred Heart motto.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: They're in me. They are in me and my mom was a Sacred Heart along too, so, yeah, I can't escape it and I really like it.

Blanche Touhill: Well, they had a philosophy of life and one wonders, with the nuns not having recruits, will the lay boards and the lay teachers be able to carry on that special message of academics for women and love of one another. It is very interesting. Generation after generations, that's what they sort of, in my mind, that they carried and you obviously agree with it.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, very much so.

- Blanche Touhill: They wanted women to be educated. It was the most interesting situation in that regard.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Well, and they lived what they taught.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, they did and they were highly educated women.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Very, and they also did a...I, unlike the Villa is more about [inaudible 53:36]. I grew up more with Stewart.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, of course, of course, how interesting because there's more reading of Stewart today than there is of Rose (Helope du Chain?).
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Well, I think she's the one who really got into the love thing. I really like her personally. She really had an impact on me but on top of that, my high school ring says ("Caritas Vincit Donere") which is "Love conquers all" and so that theme really always carried me.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you know that their headquarters is in St. Louis, and if you wanted to track what happened to certain nuns all over the world, you could do that?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: No, I didn't know that.
- Blanche Touhill: It's in the central west end. I've never gone.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: The archives.
- Blanche Touhill: The archives, yes. In the archives, you can really track if you knew some nun and you wanted to find out what happened to her.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I think I pretty much know. I'm an associate so...
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, well, then, yes.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: So, they kind of told me where everybody is.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, they did? Oh, well, that's good.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yeah, where everybody is, yeah, those who stayed, those who left.

- Blanche Touhill: What do you think the odds are about your entrepreneurial business?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: No idea. I have no idea. The universe keeps telling me to stay on but it needs to go through some...we need to scale. There's no other way of putting it.
- Blanche Touhill: Is there anything you want to say about your daughters or anybody else in the family: your husband; your sisters; your mother; your grandparents?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Maybe just that, while I never thought I would stay at home, be a stay-at-home mom, I'm delighted to have had the time with them and delighted that they have allowed me, so to speak, to venture out into my own business and supported me. Their support and Mike's support has been really very valuable to me.
- Blanche Touhill: Do you think any part of your entrepreneurial spirit came from being Cuban?
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I don't think there was an entrepreneurial bone in me. When I was at Kellogg, there was an entrepreneurial segment and I remember thinking, I don't want this. None of us wanted that. That was in the '80s, very different today. You go to the university today and everybody wants to be an entrepreneur. Back then, none of us wanted it. We were being trained to be...
- Blanche Touhill: Corporate people.
- Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, we were going to be general managers, CEOs, VPs, executive VPs, that sort of thing within a corporation, not really the entrepreneurial world. This fell in my lap for many reasons: partially because I had the time and I knew that the girls would grow up and they wouldn't need me and then what am I going to do? So that was part of it too. I was looking ahead. So it was that, it was my own search for identity at that time, like, who am I? What am I? Where am I? That sort of thing, and this tied me to it. I had no expectations as to where it would go but I got encouragement to keep going. I keep going and here I am. So it wasn't something that I thought, I want to be an entrepreneur; what do I do? It kind of fell in my lap, if that makes any sense.

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: And beans because I was missing them. I started making them because I had the time at home and it was the one thing I made that people are like...even Cubans, "Wow, these are the best beans I've ever had" and I'm like, "Really?"

Blanche Touhill: They are, they are delicious; I will tell you that.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: So I thought, "Really? You think so?" And so the seed was planted and I thought, well, maybe I'll do something with the beans. But it wasn't much deeper than that. It was just something that has evolved in time.

Blanche Touhill: And how many years have you been married?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Twenty-eight and it's been wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: So you're a woman of this century and this time.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, I guess so.

Blanche Touhill: Did you teach your children Spanish?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, I wish. I did start out that way and then somewhere along the line, it got too complicated to keep it up.

Blanche Touhill: But they loved the Cuban beans?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: They love Cuban food.

Blanche Touhill: If you went to Cuba, they'd go with you to visit?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, they would love it; they would love it; yes, they would. They love Cuban food; they know the music; they know.

Blanche Touhill: And was Havana as beautiful as everybody said?

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I remember it being...I actually like Santiago too. Santiago has mountains as well. My mom used to say it was paradise and that's why things happened in Cuba, because Cuba was paradise. That's how she would explain it.

Blanche Touhill: That's a very nice way to say it. So now St. Louis is your home?

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Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Yes, it is.

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much. It's been a lovely conversation and good luck in your entrepreneurial endeavor.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Thank you.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: It's a pleasure knowing you.

Blanche Touhill: Good.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: I hope we have many other meetings. I was telling Mike, I feel so privileged to have met you.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you'll be in the State Historical Society now forever so there you go.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: Oh, wow! Well, thank you...thank you.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you.

Estrella Cruz-Curoe: There's something about you, maybe because you remind me a little bit of my mom.