

Ofelia Esparza:

First of all, Day of the Dead is really been a resurrection, I think, of our community, but coming together as a community and Self Help Graphics has been the center for this. Today, Day of the Dead is celebrated all over. Wherever there's Mexicans throughout the United States, there's Day of the Dead. Here in Los Angeles, it takes on a different life depending where it is and where it's held and who does it, but I think the consistency of Self Help Graphics, hopefully that tradition stays. They still emphasize they'd like to have it authentic as far as that it honors our dead and that it celebrates life. And so that's where I continue doing it there. And I wait to be asked. I don't assume that I just because I've been there so long. I do wait for someone to say, "Yes, are you going to do the altar? Will you do it?" So that's an honor for me, for them to want me to do that.

Ofelia Esparza:

And of course now I include my children, Rosanna, in fact, this year we got a grant from the ACTA as a master artist apprentice. 10 years ago, it was with Elena. And so she's doing her alters and Rosanna will continue it. And that's one of the things that I feel very comfortable about, that my children, I want them to continue this. Well, for me personally, it was that my children and my grandchildren would follow this because it was my mother's tradition and those kinds of things were my mother's, what drove her in her life to remember, especially to remember our ancestors, her mother. It was like as if I knew my great, great grandmother who raised her, as if I knew her personally, but I thought I had never met her, but my son found a negative that he developed and she's holding me and I'm about three months old. And it was the most wonderful experience for me too because I always felt connected to her. She was the matriarch and my mother always talked about her and called her my Mama Pola.

Ofelia Esparza:

It was actually her great, great aunt because she took over the raising of her sister's child, then her niece, and then my mother. They were three generations. And because she didn't have children, she was a widow, had married, so she was always the one who took over the raising of, it was always a girl, that was left for all these different reasons behind with her. And then, so she still helped my mother with my brother. My mother had him in Chicago and then moved to Los Angeles where her father was. And so she still helped my mother with me until she went back to Mexico and she went back to Mexico during the... What did we call it? Not deportations, when-

Speaker 1:

Repatriation.

Ofelia Esparza:

Repatriations. And she wasn't repatriated, but because she had come from Chicago, she probably wasn't in the books, but so many of our neighbors and even paisanos from her town. So she said, "I'm going to go back with you." She said in Spanish, [foreign language 00:03:58] "I don't want to die in this Barbara's country." So she went back to my mother's hometown, Huanímaro, and I always thought she had died. I was born in 1932. She went back probably 1933 or whenever these repatriations or '34, and I thought she had died soon then. But when I went to Mexico to look up her records, I found her death certificate. She died in 1938, so she was already a very elderly lady.

Ofelia Esparza:

And anyway, that's another story. The stories about her abound and she's my hero, my mother and she, because they were single women, my mother married. But for all the in between times, she was the woman, she was la mera mera, the main woman and resourceful because she had been raised by Mama

Pola who was very strong and just they knew their own talents, paper decorations, cooking, especially the cooking. My mother could make dresses out of yardage and help sell them or exchange them for something. I mean, we were on welfare because my father got TB. She met him in Chicago, but here he was diagnosed with TB when I was six years old. My youngest sister was just a year less than a year, and she was the only one who had contacted TB. And my father, those days would send them to sanitariums for years. And so he was there many years.

Ofelia Esparza:

And then my mother divorced him and later married my stepdad who was the most wonderful, just the perfect balance for my mother because my mother was tough and independent, and he was patient and sweet and hardworking because she ran things.

Speaker 1:

She had to be tough.

Ofelia Esparza:

She had to be tough. And so he just complimented her. I always remembered my dad because... But my youngest sisters only remember my stepdad. My sister was too young to remember my dad.

Speaker 1:

Do you know where they sent your dad? What sanitarium?

Ofelia Esparza:

Yeah, he went to Olive View Sanitarium. He was there, I don't know how many years. I tried to investigate it. I haven't done deep investigate. But then he died in 1956 and I looked for that and I guess it doesn't exist anymore. It's probably the Harbor General Hospital. It was in Long Beach. It was a county hospital and he died there later years. He had a lung removed when he was in Olive View and his death certificate said he died of complications of diabetes. I never knew he had diabetes, but he had always had only one lung. And he had been a smoker too. So he died of different reasons. And it was sad because I didn't get to know him as well, but I always remembered the time that I was with him because he taught me to read. He used to be a classical flutist and he came from Leon Guanajuato and one of the tours, they came to Topeka, Kansas, and then he either stayed or came back. I'm not sure of that story, but my mother would tell me.

Ofelia Esparza:

And he came to Los Angeles to find me, and then I think he already had or susceptible to open to TB, because his wife died of TB, his first wife, he was 16 years older than my mother. And he would come home covered in the dust. And so, and all the compadres who worked with him, they were paisanos from their town, my mother's town, they all had TB. So William was saying that it was probably, his investigation, an asbestos plant or something that. Well, when I was born, it wasn't the tail end of the depression, I guess it was by 1933 or 4. And so my mother says he sold his silver flute for \$50 to buy me milk for me, and I felt so sad about that, that he gave up his... But he always listened to classical music and always on the radio and reading the paper.

Ofelia Esparza:

So that's how I learned to read. He would read the paper and I would say, "What does that say?" And he would read it in English. So then I started catching on the word the. "There it is, the." And then I started

to put things together and he would guide me, so I learned to read by the time I was in kindergarten. I never thought of it before until I was well into school. Well, that's right, I was really young.

Speaker 1:

Why did your mom go to Chicago?

Ofelia Esparza:

Because that's where her mother was. Well, that story, I always have to tell because it talks about why my mother was so marvelous. She was left behind by her mother. And when I would ask more detailed questions, my mother either didn't know or she would say, [foreign language 00:09:47] She just wouldn't go into that. But she remembers, her early memories were not of her mother, it was of her dad. In 19... Let's see, she was born in 1904. She was about six years old. 1910, during the revolution where the federal troops would go into the small villages to take the young men, [foreign language 00:10:12] I think they called it. Well, it's first draft, and so they came into her village and they took all these young men, and my mother remembers that Mama Pola told somebody, "Come, go and call Guadalupe because they're taking her dad." And she was six years old.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so she ran over there and he had asked the priest to bless him. And so that's the last she remembers seeing her dad, seeing him taken away. And she never saw him again until she came to Los Angeles, because then the war, I don't know where he went. And then he eventually... But my grandmother wasn't in the picture then. She had left earlier with her brother. And my mother would say she had a brother, someone living in New Mexico. Then later, my grandmother moved to Chicago and she married there. And so my mother, she did write to my mother, and she did write to my mother and my mother says, "But she would send me sometimes money or shoes, and so I was the only one with shoes from the United States," because most of them were barefoot.

Ofelia Esparza:

She must've been very young then because she left Huanimaro with Mama Pola. They left at night because what they would do, the federals and the revolutionaries, they'd come into the towns for food, grain, and they had graineries. And so at night, somebody would alert that the [inaudible 00:11:54] whoever it was, and then they would hide all the young girls because they would take the young girls with them. That was the way they-

Speaker 1:

The way of war.

Ofelia Esparza:

That's the way of war. And so my mother, by then, she was maybe close to 11 or 12, but so they would hide in these graineries and one night Mama Pola told her, "We're going to leave tonight." So they gathered just in a mochila, some kind of blanket or something, and she says they left at night when the moon was really bright and without shoes. And she said she got stuck with a thorn someplace and they walked at night and they made their way to Irapuato, which is, it's halfway from... And Mama Pola had worked as housekeeper for a hacienda. And they went there and they said, "Yes, you could be here." And I don't know how long they were there. It sounds like by the time my mother got to Juarez, what my mother says they would do is that they would cook and sell the food to farm workers along the way. And so they always had a way to eat and it was through her cooking and through her skills. So my mother helped her all the time.

Speaker 1:

What is the favorite meal your mom made?

Ofelia Esparza:

Oh gosh, nopalitos, I guess. She made them in all kinds of ways and the delicacy. She would ask me, "What do you want me to cook for your birthday?" I would say tacos de sesos. I loved them. I've never eaten them again like hers. It's a very high standard that I put. Many platillos that are traditional, but it was just our everyday food. And so my mother, they made their way, oh, [inaudible 00:13:42] I'm not sure exactly. My mother didn't designate, because she says they would travel and then stay a while. So my mother was a teenager by the time that one day she told my mother, because my mother was growing, she had a watcher, all these, and she says, "I'm getting told to take care of you. Write to your mother and tell her that I died. She'll have to come for you, for us," She'll say. So my mother did that, said my grandma has died.

Ofelia Esparza:

So her mother wrote back and they must have been near Juarez anyway, she says, they meant to meet at the depot, and my mother said she had a picture of her mother with a hat on, and she said, "I'll be wearing a big hat and we'll meet there in the train station in Juarez." So she says they were there all day long, and my mother, she couldn't see anybody that looked like that. And they were sitting there and they would move from place to place. And so she said but there was a woman who they had seen there, but it wasn't her mother. So then Mama Pola says, "Go ask that lady. Maybe she seen her. Maybe she's seen your mother. Take the picture and show her." And so my mother went to ask her, she said, "Oh, no, [foreign language 00:15:00]." She sent me because she was having a baby or something. So she had sent passage on the train to Chicago, and that's where my mother went.

Ofelia Esparza:

And her mother was a character too. She adored her parents like nothing because she didn't grow up with them, and so they were like treasures to her. She already had a family. I think she had three children, had just had my aunt who's 92 right now. My grandmother had a boarding house and had 15 borders. And besides, she had a young child. So my mother says, "We got there, Mama Pola and I. Mama Pola took care of the kids, and I helped my mother, the cooking, the cleaning." So she always worked. And my mother met her husband, my brother's dad there. And my mother's stories, I mean, it's an odyssey too, a saga. His name was, Rodolfo Estrada. And they got married. My mother had my brother 1926. And the details, [foreign language 00:16:19] They went to Nochistlan where he was from and learned that he had a fictitious name. He had changed his name.

Ofelia Esparza:

And Billy, my brother, says that he asked his dad why he had changed his name. He had been in prison or had got into some trouble. And so he just took somebody else's name. But my mother was stubborn. She didn't change his name. So his name should have been [Arcadio Inyegas 00:16:50] but it's Rodolfo Estrada. And all his half brothers are Inyegas, and that created a problem when he died. They said, "Well, we're the true-

Speaker 1:

Heirs.

Ofelia Esparza:

Heirs." My brother only wanted a gun that his dad had promised him. But anyway, that's another story.

Speaker 1:

People are horrible at death.

Ofelia Esparza:

My mother, but in Mexico, she was there three years with my brother. Her husband came back to Chicago because he had a job at the Sherwin-Williams Company where the railroad and the Sherwin Williams Company were the places where the immigrants, big Mexican community there. But then she got word that her mother had said that you better come home because he has another woman. And her mother, she heard the story, had threatened to shoot him if she didn't go for her daughter. And she went up there with, because she carried a 45, they called her la tejana and went up there and he got out of the two story place with tied sheets to get away from her. And so he went back and got her. My mother, her mother died unfortunately in 1930. My mother came back in the end of 1928, and her mother had died in childbirth.

Ofelia Esparza:

Oh, she died of pneumonia at Christmas time, now that I remember, and I haven't found any records, but I'm still digging. And my aunt has all these stories because she was five years old when her mother died, and my mother came to California, so she had a hard life.

Speaker 1:

Well, I know you born in 1932, so repatriation is '33. You're going to have no memory of it, but do you-

Ofelia Esparza:

I experienced that during World War II with the detention of Japanese because it affected people we knew. And I had a friend in school who was sent to the camps with her family, of course. And it was wonderful in those days. The cleaners would come, a Japanese man from the cleaners, but he had his shop on 1st Street, it was called the Okay Cleaners. And he struck up a romance with one of my mother's friends who he met at our house. She was a widow. I don't know if she was ever married. I just never pictured her as someone married because she never was, and she never had any history that I knew of. But I don't know. They met and they got married, and when they were taken, she was pregnant. Now she was a Mexican national, so she could not go with him.

Ofelia Esparza:

I didn't know why, but I asked my mother, "Why can't she go with him?" She would cry and cry, and she had a nervous breakdown. She lost her child. And I don't know what happened to her afterwards. It was so sad. And she would cry so much. Here, she found the love of her life, and then he was taken away and she couldn't go with him. Maria [inaudible 00:20:15] I don't remember her last name. And then I think she went back to Mexico. I just didn't see her again. But she used to come to our house because she had met him there just when he come. But they would talk and then joke. My mother was really an outgoing person, and he was just open to platicar with us. And then when he met her, he came back a lot often, and then they developed their own relationship. And my mother was just so happy that she got married, I guess because she hadn't been married and she was alone, and she was so happy.

Ofelia Esparza:

What I do recall is all on 1st Street where Little Tokyo is, all their merchants had all their merchandise on sale. And my mother went out there because we bought dishes, all these pretty Japanese dishes. And so

they were all selling things at almost nothing. And so we went down there a couple of times. The only contact I had was with that girl, Pearl, was her name. Well, I thought she was Chinese because there was a Chinese family who lived across the street from school, the Hammel Street School. And I didn't know, but when she left, I didn't know she had left. And we wonder what had happened. And the teacher told us that she and her family had to leave to a camp. Because I would ask why. And he says, "It's because they had to." It was just not discussed. I just learned about it later.

Ofelia Esparza:

And then from just the news that I would hear. There wasn't this massive... Not in here anyway, I saw it in the news downtown where people gathered and from the news reel, but I remember maybe a few people passing by, blowing horns, but it wasn't a big demonstration here that I experienced. Only from the news. I was coming out of Belvedere School, 1941. I was nine years old. No, I wasn't coming. I was passing by Belvedere and somebody, I think it was kids from the school, they were talking. I was coming from Salas, the corner, and they were just buzzing and I was like, "What's the matter?" And I didn't ask them, but I just was listening and they were talking about a war bombing. Now, I had really been affected by the war.

Ofelia Esparza:

In a way, it started when my father used to listen to the radio about Germany, the Poland, and then he went away in 1938. But by 1941, I was hearing the news. We had radios of course, then, and I really didn't understand. I did go to the movies a lot though, so they'd show clips like a-

Speaker 1:

A news reel.

Ofelia Esparza:

News reel. It was short clips in between film. And so I did see bombing, but in Europe, and I would wake up with nightmares because I would have seen photographs of bombings and people digging out. And I say, "Oh my gosh." I would have nightmares that I was in one of those and that I would pretend that I was dead so that they wouldn't run over me. And then I would say, but then they come walking and I would wake up. It was really traumatized by the film I had seen and afraid of bombings and wars. So when I heard that, I couldn't relate to it in a way, because I was terrified of thinking of the people who were down below, wherever they were. And how do you get away from that? So I would think of ways you could hide as a kid. How do you hide from things like that? So my thing was pretending you're dead, but then under what?

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:25:04]

Ofelia Esparza:

You're dead. But then we're under what? I would think about that quite a bit. And then in 1942, my uncle, he lived in Chicago. He came to visit my mother. He was in the army and he stayed with us for a few days before he was being shipped to the Pacific. That's when I first met my uncle. He was so handsome. My mother hadn't seen him since she had left Chicago in 1932, I guess 1930 maybe. It was a wonderful reunion for them. And her other brother was in the Navy. I didn't meet him until many years later in 1950s. I tried to look for that, but I haven't looked deeply. He was in the CCC camps. Some of his records say he's from Los Angeles, but he was born in Mexico. But all his life was in Los Angeles.

Ofelia Esparza:

But since he was older than the rest of his brothers and sisters, I know he was in the CCC camps. He was listed in the 1930s census with the rest of them. And some of his records call his birth place of birth Los Angeles, but my mother hadn't seen him. I think he was in those camps somewhere here before he joined the service. But he joined the service in Chicago. I found those records. And he went to the Pacific and he used to write to my mother, and he was prolific writer and he was an artist. And after the war, he had malaria. He was disabled the rest of his life. He did work, but it just never left him. And he would call it was a green hell. And he had drawings and writings of a diary that he showed me. And I was forever against war. I have been a pacifist all my life, I guess.

Ofelia Esparza:

Then my brother, in 1944, he went to the service. He was 18, and in 1945, he went to Germany, he was wounded, and he came home right about before the war ended, but he had already been out. And then in Vietnam, my youngest brother went too, right after graduation, he joined the Marines. I was totally against it. I was 17 years older than he was, and he was there two years almost at the end of his stay and he was wounded severely in the head. We visited him and he was in the Navy Hospital in San Diego, and it's the worst image of war. It was horrible. That whole section was on head injuries. You saw young men that it was horrible. And then my brother had a section of his skull, he had a big dent.

Ofelia Esparza:

He later had a steel plate put on. He was not paraplegic, but he was paralyzed on one side, and he was able to walk to a certain degree. And it affected us. It is interesting. My brother, Billy's dad, when he was a young kid, East LA, this was the main street, but beyond that, where all the men be, was all open fields and in fact, part of it was of Japanese flower farms. And even part of where East LA College, those were fields of flowers, really pretty.

Speaker 2:

Is that why it's called floral?

Ofelia Esparza:

Yes, Floral Drive. And he used to go hunt up there. He always worked, he made money to buy himself a BB gun that he sent for, a Red Ryder something. And they'd go hunting up in these hills. And he always was a gun enthusiast. We disagree on that part. But he has never left the service because when he came back from the service, he had been wounded in 1945. 1946, his girlfriend, they got married and in 1950 he was sent to Korea because he was in the National Guard.

Ofelia Esparza:

It was just what everybody did, veteran to get their benefits. And they used to just go march twice a month or something. He was drafted into the Korean War, and he already had his child. And almost all the people, he was a sergeant, were young kids. And he said it was the most horrible experience. They were inexperienced and they hadn't been trained for war. They had been the national guard, it was more like marching. But I guess because all these traumatic parts of his life that was a big part of his life, just have stayed with him.

Ofelia Esparza:

He belongs to these veterans group. He goes to a lot of funerals. And always, the conversation goes back to, "I remember this guy, he was from here and he got killed, or he did this or that." And it's just forever.

Ofelia Esparza:

Here it was late sixties, 1960s. I had been going back to school, as I told you, not full time yet. And I just stayed and listened to all these speakers and passionate, and it was exciting because, I was in my forties. I had my nine children already. And it just was a new experience for me to be amid and all this energy and I think I just became so conscious of political activity, all in a very short time from 1968 to the present. But all packed into after the moratorium, I continued with marching and protest with the Nicaraguan conflict and El Salvador just got... Going to East LA College was my education, and it just felt wonderful to be able to say something, to be part of this energy and these voices. It was finding my voice. It was devastating. 1968, I had all my children already. I had my nine children.

Ofelia Esparza:

I guess it started with Kennedy. It started before that. I was working at a bank a short time before I had Rosanna, 1961, but the Civil Rights Movement was happening, and I worked in a vault, it would be an open wall. But there were all these, I was a file clerk and I was new there. I had only been there a month when they moved me to that department. And the woman that sitting that was a veteran, she was an older woman. She had been there for 18 years. She was the most racist person I had ever experienced because I don't know why she started talking about, "All those niggers, they're causing so many problems." And I had already had some experience with that at school. Not against me, but the feeling of mostly immigrants I guess. And the news had come of those four little girls that were killed in a bombing.

Ofelia Esparza:

And as I recall, I imagined it as an intersection. I don't know why I think of that. And then I said, "How could you say that? Four children were killed." She's saying that, "All these people were rebel rousers and they're causing all these problems." And I said, "It's the other way around, isn't it? They just killed four children." That's terrible. Then she said, "But do you know that colored people that even their milk is black?" And I said, "That's ridiculous. Everyone's milk is dark at the beginning, I've had nine children," and she was so racist. Then afterwards, I said, "I'm just not going to talk to her." Then one day I wouldn't answer her. She just wanted to make conversation, but it was always something.

Ofelia Esparza:

She said, "You're not talking to me." And got it. I just ignored her. She would mumble and because it made her angry that here I was this little-

Speaker 2:

And she knew you were right. She knew you were right.

Ofelia Esparza:

She stopped talking to me and I would pass her, and I wouldn't even talk to her. I did tell her things, but it wasn't going to be part of her conversation. Before she was close to retirement, I didn't see her again. I don't know what happened to her, but I was happy. But anyway, those were-

Speaker 2:

That kind of violence.

Ofelia Esparza:

Yes, it was horrible. The violence was beyond my imagination. I became more interested in watching. In fact, I did a drawing from television. It was a scene, and I've seen that scene similar to that where they're

hosing down protestors, the police or the fire department with full blast on a person. Can you imagine how much it hurts?

Speaker 2:

On kids.

Ofelia Esparza:

And then there's this man who has this look. And it just stayed with me. I did a drawing of him. I tried to, anyway, but it was that look of terror. I have it in my sketchbook, and I used to stay up late watching because I would do my homework late. And I saw a lot of the news reel.

Ofelia Esparza:

My mother was very, for not having that mobility, by 1968, she was in a wheelchair, but still continued coming to the seniors group. They picked her up and she was always talking about the things that were happening. And she just loved Polanco, Richard Polanco. He was a young, charismatic politician, but this is before he got elected into Congress or the Senate. He would go to the seniors, and I am not sure, I guess they just talks, but she admired him. Roy Bull, she did canvas work for him, and she was very politically minded, and my mother was an elder, the whole housewife, her contacts were the seniors. And she would get so upset, "Old people are so close-minded." And she would complain, "All they think about is dancing and trying to make out at their old age."

Ofelia Esparza:

I said, "Really?" She said, "Why do we need these classes for? We're getting old. But you have to know what's happening. There's so many things that you have to be aware of that are not right," she would say. She was a great inspiration, and always she didn't know deeper, but she was aware of things. And I was really proud of her because by that time, I had become more politically aware. And I would talk to her about the things and she'd say, "If I could go, I would go with you. I would go and march with you and yell." And I said, "I don't necessarily yell, but I'm there." And she was very active. And even after, we all were, because she had a picture.

Ofelia Esparza:

It was interesting how many homes. She had a picture of Kennedy and then one of them two together, but she had one of Kennedy. I still have it. I used it in one of the altars because it was reflecting my mother. And then she had Our Lady Guadalupe next to it, those two are always there, Kennedy, Our Lady Guadalupe.

Speaker 2:

Bobby Kennedy?

Ofelia Esparza:

No.

Speaker 2:

JFK?.

Ofelia Esparza:

John. But then with Bobby Kennedy, he came to East LA. And that was a big event. And my mother was a very staunch supporter of him too. I was too, I didn't analyze his as much. I thought that maybe not only because his ethic seemed to be with working people and also being Catholic. And that was another connection with him. And he must truly a supporter. I've heard the lot of Dolores Huerta and Christine Caesar's granddaughter talk about that period, how he helped them in many ways.

Speaker 2:

Legitimated them.

Ofelia Esparza:

And also getting permits and getting his power, helped them open doors with certain areas, especially with the growers, his clout, he had clout that added to their being able to be places or things like that. They weren't overtly announced, but that he said he opened doors so that in their conversation, I was listening to them. I truly believe, I don't know, sometimes I'm criticizing, "You believe anything." But I truly believe that he was very interested in us, and not only that he was interested in working people and poor people and injustice.

Ofelia Esparza:

The sixties were very exciting for me. I still was having children. In the sixties, I had five more children, I believe. But my older children who were born in the fifties were in middle school, and then in the later sixties, they were in high school. And I had been a home mom. But then I started working at the schools in the late sixties because of my younger children. I would go in and help. I always wanted to be a teacher. And I thought, "That dream, I don't know if it'll happen or it'll be on hold because I have all these children to raise." But in the sixties, I started taking night classes at East LA College where I just took a few core classes, English.

Ofelia Esparza:

And those English classes were wonderful because the classes, they were night classes, and the people who came to those were voiceful, talked about issues, and our writing assignments just brought out things that I had only been, besides my raising my children involvement with our school, that I would read in the paper sometimes on television. I didn't even watch a lot of television then. And it just brought up some issues, especially, at that time, the communism, the labeling of communists, of activists. And it really was interesting to me, and it just opened up a whole new world for me as far as social issues and world issues too.

Ofelia Esparza:

That went on in the middle sixties. I took some classes, but I also then decided that I would take some art classes. And I just gradually crept back into school. I had been away from school for 15 years, and by that time, by the late sixties, I had nine children, I was pretty busy. But one of the things that I did do when I had my last child, I started getting involved in this kindergarten and early grades of my Rosanna, when she went into preschool. And then I got hired as an education aide. One started in a private, what do they call those? The pre-K.

Speaker 2:

Preschool.

Ofelia Esparza:

I can't think of the name they call them.

Speaker 2:

Head Start.

Ofelia Esparza:

Head Start program. But then when I enrolled her in public school for first grade, then I had the other ones still that were coming up for preschool.

Ofelia Esparza:

And I really became involved volunteering in their classrooms. And then I got hired as an education aide. I started working in the school in 1967, but I had been working about four or five years before that in the Head Start program. And that just was something that I loved, and I had a lot of fun. And I saw my children, they were go through there, and then they went on to first grade, but I mostly worked with the very young children and since it was in my own neighborhood, all these people that came through, there were people I knew and just connected with them. And it just gave my burning desire to go back to school. Luckily, they moved me up to a higher grade as an education aide, and then a program came in that was called College Opportunity, and it was designed for education aides who wanted to go into teaching.

Ofelia Esparza:

And it was a great federal program. The schools, of course, in East LA they were funded by federal funds, when the bilingual program started. In the early sixties, many, many immigrants were coming in, and many of the children didn't speak English. And it was dire because most of them just sat at the back of the room. And the TAs, they wouldn't call TAs then, the education aides would help them, mostly translating. And the teacher almost gave the full responsibility, off the record to the education aide. Then what they started doing was they started giving us classes through the University of Austin who would come because they had a bilingual program there. And then they were patterned after Dade County in Florida.

Speaker 2:

Florida.

Ofelia Esparza:

Because of all the Cuban, Spanish-speaking children. It all just swelled and pretty soon, but LA District was just becoming so filled with Spanish, non-English speaking children.

Ofelia Esparza:

And for me, it was an opportunity to just get immersed in teaching. And I went into that College Opportunity program, and it was housed, it was taught at East LA College. And then when I finished with the two year, I got my associative.

Speaker 2:

The AA.

Ofelia Esparza:

AA. And then when I transferred to Cal State LA, I applied for a small scholarship with the Ford Foundation, which was apart, and I got that. And I was a very good student, I have to say, because that was my passion. And when I went on to Cal State, that was in 1972, I was still working at the school, but I was working towards a credential by then. And it was just a wonderful experience because I made lifelong friends. And it also brought up the fact that so many of the children that went through the school system in the thirties, forties were really not prepared for high school even.

Ofelia Esparza:

Many of the women, and there was a few men who were in that program, had been out of school for 15, 20 years. And the writing skills were rarely needed, writing skills and English skills, they had gone through the system. Some had not finished, but the majority of them had, but it was hard for most of the participants to do the writing to a college level work. And then they designed some classes like remedial work, but we were all in the same program. That's what they did. But I felt I really benefited, not that I was better, but I always did well in school, especially in English. And since I was very young, I was bilingual by the time we went into kindergarten, although it was all Spanish speaking in my neighborhood, that was my first language. But I really benefited from that program.

Ofelia Esparza:

It honed my skills, learned many new ones. And then I did liberal studies, it was such a well-rounded education, I felt, got lots of art electives and science. And throughout my career, I've really mixed the two because the same precepts for the formulas about science discovery and solving problems applied I felt in art.

Ofelia Esparza:

And then the other thing in the sixties, while I was in working at the elementary school, the school was Hamill Street School, which is no longer there. It was the school I went to as a child too. And my brother, who is in his eighties now, the teacher I had, who I chose to be my master teacher, May Cowen, was the best teacher of any teacher I've ever had, college, university. She was the best. And I learned so much from her, and I really patterned my teaching, her philosophy rather, after hers, because she had an open structure, but she called it experiential learning, where she had stations in the classroom. I ran a couple, but then of course I had the Spanish-speaking children. It was a mixed language program. The children were immersed in both or exposed to both languages and emerged in their native language, but they still had a little bit of each.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:50:04]

Ofelia Esparza:

In their native language, but they still had a little bit of each. And I see some of the programs now that are so popular, the immersion program, it's been happening since with the '50s and '60s successfully. I felt it was such a wonderful experience because I got, before I took my education classes, I had been taking training and teaching, especially language in Spanish.

Ofelia Esparza:

But like you said, when you're bilingual, the learning of language or linguistics is they help each other. And that I had been Spanish-speaking first, and it was my mother's Spanish, I didn't study it, so I learned a lot of Spanish or what they would say proper Spanish because I would use it, Spanglish sometimes. But as far as, I guess, conjugation and sentencing, things that you learn by speaking only were already ingrained in me. And then learning about the structure of the language, and it's the same way to learn

about the structure of English. Of course, the vowels are different. But all that together, just I thought, I feel so fortunate that I was able to have that kind of education to teach children reading or language.

Ofelia Esparza:

And I love language. I became very interested in linguistics because I started to see how, if I understood it in English, even though many times I didn't pronounce it correctly, but I knew the meaning. And so in a sentence or in reading, that was something I had never dealt with, especially technical topics. But I could recognize meanings just because I was bilingual and I had... Then when I studied Spanish, but I got my wings clipped in the university when I took, too, Spanish III. And I remember one time I felt, "Well, I know more Spanish."

Ofelia Esparza:

And usually, I was already in my 40s, so when you're in college or in the university, most of the students are younger. And I wasn't there to look for a boyfriend or to pass my time, I wanted to finish and learn as much as I could. So sometimes the older students really did well, or at least they were so much more focused-

Speaker 3:

Re-entry students are better. They give you a run for your money if you're a teacher.

Ofelia Esparza:

Yes. And so we just were involved in learning and getting your information and doing your best. Of course, not that young people didn't, but they had other things going on and the clubs and all this. So I didn't have time for that because once I was in school, I would go home. I couldn't have done this without my mother and my husband and my oldest sons because they helped with babysitting. And when my husband wasn't there, my mother, my kids went to her house. When I was a aide, I was near home. I would go home at noon and see if I could help her with something, get something from my fridge or take it down to her house to prepare something. But it was nonstop, so the only time I ever had to myself to study was after they were all asleep. So I would stay up till three o'clock in the morning, sometimes later.

Ofelia Esparza:

And then when I finished my homework, I would just draw. And I did so much artwork during the late '60s and early '70s than I've ever done. And I want to discipline myself to do that again because I have so much work, whether it was maybe just drawing and sketching with the materials I had at my disposal. I took an oil painting class at East L.A. College during the early '60s, and I enjoyed it. It was just one-year class, but couldn't afford those materials. So I did that there. And then I went back to watercolors, and usually it was the school-grade watercolors.

Ofelia Esparza:

But all this time, of course, it went hand-in-hand with my going to school, my kids. And then my son, my oldest son, he graduated from middle school in 1968. So all those years, I was not as involved in the middle school because I was so involved in the elementary school. But those were years that I started to become aware, social awareness and having a voice. I always say that it gave me a voice because even in the school where I worked at during the tumultuous begin before the walkouts, and before the Moratorium, things were just brewing. And you started to see that, first of all, with the participants of my age who were part of the COP program, and then with some of the students that were coming through, especially Spanish-speaking students who were not really getting there the best that could be.

Ofelia Esparza:

One of the things my master teacher, her name is May Cowan, she said, "When you are a teacher, you have to look at these children like they're your own children. What do you want for your own son and daughter? You can give them less, then you shouldn't be a teacher because you have to want the same for them that you want for your children." And it's true. And if you don't feel that way, how can you live with yourself if you say, "Oh, God?"

Ofelia Esparza:

It was done quite a bit. I could count the teachers on my hand that I had that meant something to me. And they were throughout the grades, but they were teachers who made a difference. And so I always felt I want to make a difference, whether it's small. And then the ones that I worked with, I picked teachers that I felt were really good teachers, that I liked the way they treated the children and their philosophy of fairness. And yet strictness, I could not deal with palsy kinds of teaching because it just doesn't work. Because if you're a parent, well, here I had nine kids, and now I've had thousands of students in my 28 career, not counting my education aide, you have to be the leader. You can't be a pal. Or you could be friendly and you could be compassionate, but you still have to show that what you say is what has to be followed. And I don't mean dictatorial because you have to consider the feelings.

Ofelia Esparza:

And I learned along the way, I wasn't perfect. But it just is something, teaching is a career that you never have it all. You don't know it all. You learn a lot and you learn as you go and you apply it. And it's so exciting.

Ofelia Esparza:

The first Head Start that I got involved in where my daughter Rosanna went to was, it was, I guess it's a Presbyterian Church in East L.A., and I think the name of that center was called Cleland House. And the teacher was one of my friends who I graduated with from middle school and high school involved with that church. I'm not sure what the nomination is, but they were... Well, they got much money and it was very grassroots, very comfortable. And the teacher that taught the class was wonderful. She loved it because it was her community, children that from family she knew, so it wasn't someone from the outside. And that was, I think, why I just loved it because I knew where her heart was.

Ofelia Esparza:

I came in as an aide, but I did some work for her like art and cultural things. But the funding was very, I guess it was limited because it had been on for a couple of years or three years before I was involved in it. And they had good materials, but in retrospect, it was really small. I thought it was wonderful. They had everything they needed, but they were always counting, being a little frugal with things they bought.

Ofelia Esparza:

But initially, I think either the church or the government money, they had equipment that was, for me, I thought it was wonderful. But compared to what eventually the schools had, it was really small change.

Speaker 3:

But it was so necessary for that.

Ofelia Esparza:

It was so necessary. All the children who were there were from the immediate neighborhood. And most of them, I would say somewhere at the poverty level. I didn't consider myself at the poverty level, but we had very small needs. My husband was a truck driver and I lived at my mother's house that she rented to us for \$50 a month. Can you believe that, in the '60s? I mean, I never said, "Oh, I'm in such a need."

Ofelia Esparza:

Well, I always say, when we were little, I didn't know we were poor. But also, I owe it to my mother who was such a resourceful person, and we got our needs. And mostly, it was food and things to do and clothes that she embellished from the government because we were given the dole of food and we would get a tonic. I loved it. I think it was molasses and it was a health thing for poor people. We'd go and get our dole of... And then at school, we would get cod liver oil because it was for very poor kids. We'd get in a line and give us cod liver oil, and then an orange.

Speaker 3:

An orange is like a reward, right?

Ofelia Esparza:

No, it wasn't a reward. It was put on by the county's health-

Speaker 3:

I was trying to think it was a reward for the liver, getting the taste out of your mouth.

Ofelia Esparza:

Some people didn't like it, but I thought it was okay. But in the Head Start, they also had a small nutrition. They would get a lunch, and it was just a snack, but I can't remember what the snacks were. And then on nap time, so it was like kindergarten, and I loved working in it, and I was really very so grateful that I had that kind of a program.

Ofelia Esparza:

Having had all those children, my oldest children who were born in the early '50s to mid-'50s, they were four of them. They went to kindergarten, but there was never that kind of program. All the children who went through there, I could see their parents really appreciated, and there was a lot of parent involvement. And people wanted to bring, I mean, people just wanted more of it because their children were happy, and it helped them, especially with language. It was all about language, learning language through experiences, through activities, through, of course, lessons. But it's no different than Sesame Street because it targets the very young child. Now it started getting more into academics, but when I was teaching in my teaching career, they were teaching the sounds and the letters, and I think that was okay for some children, but it's not for everybody. I think it should be fun and children should be able to socialize and also to learn language, because I saw that throughout my career as the most needed thing.

Ofelia Esparza:

And then with children from not just Mexico, from other countries who have to learn, they would say, "They have to learn how to describe their environment. And if they don't have that language, it affects their writing skills." They could do it in their own language, but if they have to perform in English for testing and everything, or moving on to another district where there's no Spanish support, they're going to struggle because they have to learn as they go. And to have someone direct them to, "This is how..." Many children can learn on their own. Many children and young children do that all the time, but you also

need support, and to enhance that, and to expand it, and to heighten it. And the more language that children learn, it just affects the rest of your learning throughout your life. It works for, I mean, it's true of adults, but especially for young children. Before five years old, it's the most... Well, it's been proven that the span of most learning in your entire life is your first five years, so language is so important.

Ofelia Esparza:

Well, my husband was a truck driver, and he had worked very hard all his life. He was the oldest of 14. His family used to go to the piscas, we called it, the fruit picking every summer. His dad had a job here. He had to work all the time, his dad. And so summers was the opportunity for all the family to make some money. And so since he was the oldest, he was the man because his dad would take the whole family, I mean, all 14 of them at one time, at least 10 if not all of them, even the babies because... And so then he would drop them off, come back and go to work because they had... And they lived in a really poor, poor house. They were poor.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so my husband and his family would go and they would get together with other family members. They had a compound where they went year after year and worked the whole summer. And of course, my husband, as a teenager carried the bulk of the work with his brothers, but mostly him. And then with that money that they earned, that's how they would buy shoes and clothes for school. So it was like a one-time thing. So I don't know how many pairs they could get. Now my husband went up to middle school, he graduated from middle school. And then the day after, joining the Army. He felt that that was the best way he could help his mom, because he was actually 17, but his mother signed that he was eligible because he couldn't have gone without it.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so they were all beginning to go into high school. And it's sad because he said he didn't wear shoes when he was up to sixth grade. He didn't have enough shoes. And so he said his soles were thick so he could step on glass. And so he had shoes only for special occasions. So he missed a lot of school because he was embarrassed. But at middle school, he got a perfect award attendance. He never missed... He loved school. And then he excelled in sports. So he was like the person everybody admired.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, I remember you talked about asking him to Sadie Hawkins.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so he was very much supportive that my children were in school. And of course, I was very, very educationally minded, and so he loved that. And so he knew that I had always wanted to be a teacher, but I just had to go to school. It was something that I had put off. And then by the time I had my ninth daughter, I would just say, "I just have to." So I actually started with elective kind of class. But then when I said, "I'm going to take English class." Took two classes at night. And he says, "Well, if you could manage."

Ofelia Esparza:

But my mother would help me. And when I started full time, well, it helped with our... You had to have full-time hours working to be in that COP program, you had to carry 12 units but you had to be a six-hour aide. You couldn't be part time, because I guess it felt that was a commitment to become a teacher. That was the goal, eventually. And so that was very tough because I wasn't home. And so we didn't really

make arrangement. It just fell into place because what I was trying to do was to be there, come home at noon, and my classes were from four o'clock on.

Ofelia Esparza:

Well, since I worked near, the school is near the house, I would come home and do... But my mother would take care. I didn't really have to do things for her, but I just wanted to make sure things were going. And so the only thing that I think the downside of that period was that my husband, I didn't see him as much and-

Speaker 3:

Your mom must have been very proud of you.

Ofelia Esparza:

She was, and she was very strong on education. She had gone to third grade in Mexico, and she owed that possibility to her great-grandmother who raised her because she said she had to go to school. In those days, in the turn of the century to the early... third grade was considered the limit for rural places. But when I compared third grade to our third grade children, they were so far advanced. It was like sixth grade. So they packed a lot of learning in those the third grade classes. It changed. I don't know when it did, but I think the requirement was to sixth grade. And then to go on further, it took people who could afford to send their kids to the next grades, the higher grades. But in the rural places, I think it was up to sixth grade. But of course, when my mother was in school, she was grateful that her grandma said, "You have to go to school." Because they would've dropped out or not had any schooling at all.

Ofelia Esparza:

Now I was already teaching, I started teaching in 1975, and I would take a bus there at Gage. And when I took a bus, I took the bus there on Gage and Cesar Chavez. That would leave me over there at Cal State. And I remember a couple of times that I walked by, the mosaics weren't there yet, still. And I didn't know what was in there because the corner had been a bookstore and I went there all the time. It was a religious bookstore. So I always went in there looking for beyond religious books, art or cultural books. There were, once in a while I would find. So I'd go and I'd spend a long time trying to look for something. But it was the whole part that was the gallery was a bookstore. And when it moved, I was really sad because there's no bookstores in East L.A., none at all. Can you believe that?

Ofelia Esparza:

And so I don't think I paid attention. I can't remember what other businesses used to be there at that time. When I was a little girl, I knew the businesses there. And then one day, I saw this, the door was open next to the gallery and there was a sign that said, "Art instructors, sign up." And so I looked in there and I said, "Art instructors, what is this place, then?" I don't remember seeing a sign. I don't think they ever had a sign until much later. And they told me to go and talk to Sister Karen.

Ofelia Esparza:

Well, when I went upstairs to meet Sister Karen, she asked me if I knew anything about Day of the Dead. I said, "Yes, I do. I know it's a tradition my mother followed, and she practiced it here in the United States and carried over some of the things that she would do like altars and different things, flower making." And so I said, "Well, then come on in and come on Saturdays." It was wonderful. There was so many people upstairs. It was very bare compared to how it turned out later. I mean, the room was bare of things. There were no partitions. It was just tables and people. Mostly, we worked on the floor. And she just said, "Well, we're going to do headdresses. You could ask Michael Mezcal. He has this design. It's a cardboard

design, but you could do whatever you want with it and then engage the community. But what I do want," we had a meeting before it started, "I do want you all to do at least one museum quality piece because UCLA is looking into keeping a collection of the work we're doing here."

Ofelia Esparza:

And so it was wonderful because I hadn't done large pieces in paper mache, and I learned just by looking at how they were doing things. But while I would help the students, we devised our own design, just we had lots of paper materials and stapled lots of cardboard. Most of it recycled. And I think that they didn't have big budget then. And so I think I designed one very simple headdress. We were doing, my workshop along with a couple of other people, headdresses for the processions.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so I made really simple flat ones that were to be tied around the neck. And in the meantime, I started designing the one I was going to turn in, work on whenever I could, and it was using Michael's design, and it turned out to be this tall, and I cut out designs on it. I had so much fun. That was the first year. And so we did whatever was needed. And then for the Day of the Dead, it was meeting at Evergreen Cemetery and walking in a procession to Self Help Graphics. And while we were preparing for that, the days before, and on the... Well, it was during that day, too, a huge community altar, and it was on the stage, and this one was not coordinated by anyone. Everyone just worked on it. I worked on some panels for the-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:15:04]

Ofelia Esparza:

Everyone just worked on it. I worked on some panels for the curtains, and then we all painted a box. And I've tried to use that idea again, it's Self Help Graphics, it hasn't been... It just doesn't get done, but I would like to do it sometime.

Ofelia Esparza:

We had all these boxes that were flattened out. I think they were donated, we just build them up and painted them black, and put our own designs in white. Everybody had their own design, and then we stacked them to make the altar. And then everybody, all the artists brought things. And I ended up just doing the altar using everybody's things.

Ofelia Esparza:

So that became my, I just fell into it, because I had done small altars, never on that scale. At home, my mother had four altars during the year. The Day of the Dead was not a huge thing. It was more the ceremony and the celebration than the altar. But she did have flowers, mostly fresh flowers, and the photographs that many families had in their home, who have the family ancestors. And it was just more of the ceremony part.

Ofelia Esparza:

Now, my mother never had skulls. We didn't have access to sugar skulls at least. But we did make skulls for the altar. It was all paper flowers and designs made out of cutting out paper. Not the fancy [foreign language 01:16:40]. What she did when she was a little girl in her little town, she had already lived in the United States several years by the time she moved to Los Angeles where I was born.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so, it was wonderful because it was exploring, and inventing, and just participating in making things, decorating, which was, I just loved it. I had, outside of my home, I hadn't done that on a big scale or publicly. And so that's how it just developed. And it was a huge altar, and it was all the way to on the stage. And then these boxes that we gathered just built up into the hall. And people would add things to it, but it was just so beautiful.

Ofelia Esparza:

One of my sons and his girlfriend did some face painting. And Rosana, she was a teenager, this was 1979, 1980, '81. Those are the three years that I really got really involved, because I had started teaching in 1975. And so what I started doing after those first three or four years that I started with Self Help Graphics, I dedicated a lot of time to doing altars in my school for my class, and then inviting the parents.

Ofelia Esparza:

So I was involved with Self Help Graphics Day of the Dead for a few years. And then I had kind of a gap, because I was so teaching, and I didn't do the Saturdays. And then in 1988, Elena called me and told me that Sister Karen had asked if I could do an altar for her. They had asked somebody, but they were busy. But she knew that I had done the altars for in a gallery. A gallery, oh my God, it was called Sonrisa Gallery in Little Tokyo.

Ofelia Esparza:

And I said, "Well, yes." I had the idea of doing someplace outside of my own community, or at home, was really something special and just different. So I did. And I used all the materials they had in their ceramics. In fact, I have a picture of that. It was a Josefina Giular, a wedding couple. They were this big. They were beautiful. So I did all...

Ofelia Esparza:

But I did everything by hand. It was small. And I did my own [foreign language 01:19:25]. I brought in arch from... So that was, I guess the first one that I did that was mine. At Self Help Graphics, it was always the community altar. And so it was a small one. And so that began it. And then at Self Help Graphics, I would just, started doing my own altar where they would call, it was part of the gallery. I didn't get involved in the community altar. I did our own.

Ofelia Esparza:

And that's when my children would start helping me, my son especially. And so from then on, every year I have done one, at Self Help Graphics in the gallery. And then in 1997, no, '96 I believe... It was before Sister Karen died. She died in 1997. I had started doing community alters. So I actually was doing two alters, one for the community upstairs in the salon, and then one that was my own piece or my family's piece that was part of the art exhibit.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so I've done so many alters. I didn't document the early ones, or somebody would give me a photograph, but from 2000 on, I just kept track of everything. Even the schematics that I would make, I still have a whole album. And I've dug up old ones when I come across them and add them to the archive that I'm making.

Ofelia Esparza:

But after 1988, they would call me to do something outside of Self Help Graphics. So they needed an altar or somebody to talk about Day of the Dead. So they were just calling me if I was available. And then in 1996, Sister Karen, she was really so supportive. I really admired her and respected her.

Ofelia Esparza:

I never called her Karen. Everyone did, but I guess my upbringing. And then she was close to my age. I had no idea how old she was, but I always called her Sister Karen. And she would say, "Ofelia Esperanza," and I said, "I wonder why she calls me Esperanza? I guess because of my last name." And she said, "I'm sorry, I know that's not your first name."

Ofelia Esparza:

But she would, sometimes I thought it was, doesn't she remember me? But it was just, she interchanged my name to Ofelia to Esperanza. And-

Speaker 4:

Well, doesn't esperanza mean hope?

Ofelia Esparza:

Yes, it does.

Speaker 4:

You are a very source of light.

Ofelia Esparza:

And in 1996, she nominated me for an award at the Watts Arts Festival. And so I was awarded, it was called Art Legend. She had received it the year before.

Ofelia Esparza:

So it was just, Self Help Graphics opened so many doors for me. But I've always been there. I never have taken off. I just feel that that's where I belong, where I'm part of. And in fact, I got a call in 1996 from Sister Karen... No Tomas, and she said, "Would you come in? Sister Karen wants to talk to you." And I said, "Well, I would."

Ofelia Esparza:

So what they had, he says, "How would you like to go to Scotland?" I said, "Well, Scotland, never thought about it." "Well, we want you to go to Scotland," because they were doing this celebration in Glasgow. Two of the artists from there had come with a UK artist exchange.

Ofelia Esparza:

And they went, several artists came to different galleries and museums, and the two that were assigned to Self Help Graphics were here during Day of the Dead. And what they did were prints, they were print makers. And they really loved that celebration.

Ofelia Esparza:

And Sister Karen said that they decided, "We want to have one in our studio." They had the Glasgow Print Studio very much patterned after Self Help Graphic, except the artists they're paid a nominal fee, but that's how they sustain. And then they sold the work there.

Ofelia Esparza:

And Glasgow is an old city, and there's a lot of artwork. In fact, the Glasgow School of Art was right next to the studio. And so the plan was that they patterned our Day of the Dead, they had workshops. People make artifacts for a procession. And so they asked Margaret Sosa, she's the master [foreign language 01:24:30] person, teacher, artist.

Ofelia Esparza:

And then Yolanda Gonzalez went to represent Self Help Graphics. So three of us went. And they asked me what kinds of things I needed. I made a list. And what I took were flowers already... I made all the flowers at home. But I didn't open them up, so they'd fit in a little bag. And then I took a little set of Mexican dishes, to represent me, and a picture of my mother, my husband, and our lady Guadalupe. So those were the things I took with me, because it was their altar.

Ofelia Esparza:

And it was a wonderful experience. It was a lot of pub nights though. They love the pubs right next door. It was so funny, because while we stayed at a professor from the University of Glasgow, the art department head, we stayed at her flat. That was Margaret and I. Yolanda had some other place to stay.

Ofelia Esparza:

I think she came a couple of days later, but Margaret and Yolanda stayed longer, because I was working and I could only take a week off. In fact, my principal was so nice, and I said, "I am invited. I have to go." And he said, "Of course, you go, and how are you going to name it?" I says, "Well, can I say that I'm sick?" "I didn't hear that. I didn't hear that."

Ofelia Esparza:

So I took a sick leave. It's terrible.

Speaker 4:

That's awesome.

Ofelia Esparza:

But it was limited. And then I did do some extra work. Well, I did workshops at my school. I was the art person just designated, because we didn't have art consultants. We had a one for the whole district. So we did our own thing at my school, and I was involved with that.

Ofelia Esparza:

Anyway, it was such, the wonderful part about Glasgow was that they took us to dinner, and that's where we'd go eat most of the time. And because it was Latino, it was Argentine, and they had huge pictures of gauchos, horses. It was fairly bare. Not anything really Mexican, but that was the Latino place for us.

Ofelia Esparza:

And they were really cool. They were so nice to us. But on the Day of the Dead celebration... Oh, the other part was that I had an opportunity to make a print as part of the exchange. They had 25 artists from Glasgow doing prints and 25 of ours, of that project. And then they exchanged them.

Ofelia Esparza:

Rather, they made a copy for each one. So it was a simultaneous exhibit, 25 artists of Glasgow and Self Help at both galleries, in Scotland and in here in East LA. So it was such a great project. It wasn't repeated, but I was so happy to be part of it. So one of my prints was in the gallery too. And the gallery was an upstairs gallery, about the size of Self Help Graphics upstairs maybe.

Ofelia Esparza:

And they had a procession from this old, old cemetery that was about two blocks away from the studio. And it's one of those that has the old headstones and crosses. I think it was from the 1300s. And so they had a procession from there. Margaret and I were getting ready at the flat where we were, and it was always raining. And so they ordered a taxi. I can't remember what they call them, the name they have for him.

Speaker 4:

A lorry?

Ofelia Esparza:

I think it was lorry. And there was a lot of traffic once we got closer to the place. I don't have a good orientation. It was downtown, but everything's old. And that area was an old area. The buildings are very old too. And then we were stuck in the traffic. And then Margaret says, "I think I know where it is. Shall we get up?" And we said, "Yeah, let's do it."

Ofelia Esparza:

Because we were anxious to get there, because the opening supposedly, I can't remember the time, but we were close to that time. In fact, we were past that time while we ran. And I had an idea of where we were. So finally, we hear a band and lots of yelling. And so we just ran to the front of the studio. And it was packed with people, and the procession had stopped there, and they were playing.

Ofelia Esparza:

And they're playing, (singing), tequila. And it was Yolanda leading the tequila each time. "Viva, Self Help Graphics." And they would say, "Viva." "You say viva." It was so cute. Well, they played La Bamba and Tequila most of the evening, in honor of we Chicanas. It was so cute. But upstairs it was packed. You couldn't even move. It was, everyone, even though the opening said a time, people were there much earlier. And there was artists dressed as Frida Kahlo. I have a great shot of this artist with a big sombrero. And he had a big [foreign language 01:30:24] painted on. They were Mexican for that day.

Ofelia Esparza:

And one of the things that was beautiful about the altar is that the days before, we walked to a downtown district that was close by, and the artists who had come said, "Well, you could buy whatever. We have a budget." The only thing I bought was I needed reeds to make an arch. And they brought me a whole bunch of them, real tiny reeds so I had to tie them. But they were huge.

Ofelia Esparza:

The materials I had, it was wonderful, because they provided as much as they could. I had already made the flowers, so they had engaged students from that arts to come and help me. So I had them open flowers or make flowers. And they were design students, and we had all this cardboard. So I said, well, we need picture frames and we need candle holders.

Ofelia Esparza:

So they made candle holders with cardboard, and painted them. And they painted frames. It was really a great event. And then brought, I asked them to bring in the staff, and to announce to bring in old photographs. And so it was a beautiful looking... It looked vintage already, just by the things.

Ofelia Esparza:

And on that walk we took downtown, I bought some, a tartan material to represent them, of course. And Margaret made up a [foreign language 01:31:59]. We have a beautiful shot. She got up on the ladder and took the shot of all the papel before the event started. It's beautiful. And it was on a blog that Alex Ellerof put. I don't know if he still has it.

Ofelia Esparza:

I printed out the... It's not so clear. And Self Help Graphics may still. I think it's on the SEMA archives, some of the photographs from that. I have a couple of them, but I don't have all the event happenings there.

Ofelia Esparza:

So that was my wonderful trip. I stayed there one week. And during that week, besides the making of the altar and all these things, they had workshops with the university, the art school there. And Yolanda showed slides of Self Help Graphics, and she presented. We did a ceremony of sage before the opening, and it was just a wonderful experience.

Ofelia Esparza:

So that was one of the big doors that Self Help Graphics opened for me.

Ofelia Esparza:

I started doing mono prints there in 1991. At that time, it was a transition between, Oscar Eduardo was there for a short time when I started. And then Esta Dolores Guerrero Cruz, she was like the interim until they hired someone. And then just shortly after is when Jose came in. And so the rest of the year.

Ofelia Esparza:

And a year ago, two years ago before they closed Self Help Graphics, the last time I did a print there, I've been trying to get it rescheduled. But they say their booked, they have all these special projects. So one of my biggest desires is to make some more prints at the Self Help Graphics. I have over a hundred prints that I've done there.

Ofelia Esparza:

I don't have them all, but I counted that many as far as I can tell. And we were talking there in his little cave there, at the old Self Help Graphics. And I was telling Jose that the closest I ever came to calling Sister Karen by her name was 10 years later, her death, when I was asked to do the altar for her 10th anniversary.

Ofelia Esparza:

And I did, it was called, the show was called Flowers from Karen's Garden, because she loved her garden. And she lived here in East LA, on Gade Street. And the year before she died, her house was opened on Saturday for artists to come and paint. And so her garden, her flowers are the artists, who she nurtured and helped to grow. I'm one of them.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so when I was looking through their collection, in bad shape, her photographs, I was able to look through her pictures. And it was a wonderful experience for me. And when I wrote about the statement, this is the first time I call her Karen. I always called her Sister Karen. And so it was a great opportunity for me to get to know her, not only as a director, workaholic, chain smoking, none like no none you've ever known. But also as a daughter, as a colleague, her community was very close, as a woman who, an artist. And it was a really special experience for me to do that after.

Ofelia Esparza:

So what Rosana helped me, we did this patio, this garden altar at the corner of Self Help Graphics. And actually, I put things from my garden, my patio, things that rocks, and little statues, and flowers, and then her photographs in there. So it's one of my very dearest altars. And I've done at least... Well, about four years ago, I made a list of how many altars have done for Sister Karen. At that time, it was like 26 over the last, how long has she been gone? Two thousand...

Speaker 4:

15 years.

Ofelia Esparza:

15 years. I've done so many altars. And the year that she died, for her memorial, that was the first monumental piece that I had done on my... Well, it was a community altar. Many artists responded and brought so many fresh flowers. And many artists, Elena Cervantes, she's the one I re... There were many others who, they just took over the making the bouquets, because that was a big project. It was tons of flowers.

Ofelia Esparza:

And so my son helped me, and a couple of other people. It was Ricky Beltran and Dennis Lawler helped me make the foundation. And we kept adding and adding, because there were so many ofrendas. Artists brought little paintings or photographs of them and Sister Karen. It was such an outpouring of love and respect. It was very moving.

Ofelia Esparza:

And I was so honored to be asked to... Well, they asked me to do the altar, but actually I directed it. I did a lot of it, the foundation, but there was so many people involved that it was more of a direction.

Ofelia Esparza:

So it was the first huge, outside of the community alters from earlier years that I had done. And after that, they just had become monumental, because most of the places that I've invited to are large places and large site specific altars. So they've grown.

Ofelia Esparza:

But now my cadre of my children, especially Rosana, in earlier years it was my oldest son, whatever needed to be done. My son, Javier, has just built the foundation. And so a lot of planning goes. It's become a major part of my work, my life actually. And so, I owe it all to Sister Karen. And back to that conversation that I was having with Jose, with Joe at Self Help a couple of years ago, maybe three years ago, I was talking to him about that particular altar, how I had called her. I always called her sister Karen. And I said, "Are you sure I can quote you on that?" He said, "Yeah, Sister Karen told me one day," he said, "take care of Ofelia. She belongs from this community and you take care. Make sure that she gets in to do the workshops."

Ofelia Esparza:

And it just made me cry, because I thought, I never thought that... It was wonderful to know that she had thought about me in that way.

Ofelia Esparza:

My son, Javier, is quite creative. And he finds it more as a, not an obligation, a dedication of helping me with altars. And so we do brainstorming. And because I feel it's important for me, my family, to be doing altars very much in a traditional way, sometimes we veer out to a contemporary idea, but there's still elements of the traditional way, is that they carry this tradition on.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:39:53]