

## Cheryl Noralez Figueroa Interview Los Angeles June

Ben: You'll just talk to Athena the entire time. Just go ahead and say your name and spell it.

Cheryl: Cheryl Noralez Figueroa (laughs) C-H-E-R-Y-L N-O-R-A-L-E-Z F-I-G-U-E-R-O-A

Ben: (a bunch of audio mumbo-jumbo adjustments)

Athena: who was that American that was there yesterday?

Cheryl: She is a professor from Cal-State San Diego.

Athena: And she drives all the way up here?

Cheryl: Yeah.

Ben: We're good to go.

Cheryl: uh-huh

Athena: Do you want her to say her name again?.

Ben: ahh... yeah, why don't you say it again. Just because

Cheryl: Just because? Sure. (laughs) Just kidding. I'm sorry. (laughs). I'm a clown (laughs). Cheryl Noralez Figueroa. C-H-E-R-Y-L N-O-R-A-L-E-Z F-I-G-U-E-R-O-A

Ben: Perfect, and you'll just talk to Athena

Athena: Perfect. Ok Cheryl... tell us, first of all, about your organization.

Cheryl: Garifuna American Heritage Foundation United. I umm.... started that organization perhaps in two-thousand- three. Ummm.... it was basically an organization geared toward re-aculturating the people here in the United States, because I've noticed like a lot of young people my age, either they migrated here when they were pretty young like myself... I came here to this country when I was four years old. Or they were raised up here and they just kind of lost track of their culture. You know, when you move to the United States it's a lot easier to assimilate and just get accustomed to the American way of life and you get kind of, you know, lost, you know. You sway away from your culture and everything like that. But I was fortunate enough that when I was raised up here, we had a really strong Garifuna community. You know, in the area where we raised up in. And it was very important for us to maintain the same level of cultural identity that we had back home. And every weekend the same group of people were always there with the children. You here your parents, you know, speaking in Garifuna every day. You see them engaging in the

cultural aspects every day, every Saturday, Sunday in you own back yard. So that was something that I was raised up with here in the United States that I just wanted to make sure that my children had a piece of that history and identity of who they are.

Athena: So how did you learn Garifuna. How did your parents keep that language alive in your home?

Cheryl: Every single day my parents spoke Garifuna to us. The only differences being here in America and my education here in America, we would answer in English. (laughs) So I was raised up with having Garifuna as my first language with my grandmother who raised me in Belize until I migrated here at 4. All she spoke to me was in Garifuna (laughs). Again, you know, being that Belize is an English speaking country. You know, I would you know, remember answering her in Garifuna at young age, you know. So, I do recall having my first language as Garifuna in Belize, but then when I came here and entered the school system, umm... they told my parents that in order for us to be able to kind of accelerate more into the English aspect that we just had to really speak one language at the house. That was back then. So my parent would, you know, they would limit a little bit of their Garifuna to us, but not really because of what the influence of the school were saying, you know, you have to just speak one language so they could learn how to speak better English. So, you know my father was not for that, so he maintained speaking Garifuna to us, but my mom was like, we want them to do good in school, so let's try to emphasize the English and everything like that. So it was kind of a little, you know, we speak Garifuna at home, you know as much as possible but then when we're in school we're totally immersed in English and everything like that. So, you know my sisters were kind of able to adapt a little bit more because they were still able to speak Garifuna. You know, because they came here a little bit later and they were already really knowledgeable and they had that strength in language, but me being that I started my whole entire school here in the U.S. it was kind of hard for me to maintain just the literal language, but a lot of the understanding.

Athena: Good, so tell us a little bit more about what your organization is doing. What kind of things it does and...

Cheryl: OK, well the Garifuna American Heritage Foundation our number one thing that we do is educating people in regards to the culture. And we do that through different things. The number one thing that we do is called the Garifuna community forum. And initially that was to kind of educate the community about who we are because... excuse me, I have to cough. (laughs) because in the Garifuna community and in the United States and around the world a lot of people don't know who we are. We're like ahhh... a mysterious exotic culture like oooo.... Garifuna, it's something new. And we're like wow, are we really something new? You know, we know about ourselves, it's just so funny that in this world of internet and everything like that that people are still amazed that they're able to have this cultures that have never been discovered, even here in the United States. We're you're neighbors, we go to church with you. You see us in your schools and markets, but because usually just think we're African American or anything and they don't know anything else about us. You know, when they see us, number one, it's like where you from? We're from Belize. Where's that? In Central America. It's like, wow there's black people in Central

America, that can't be true. Like, yes, we're from Belize and there is black people in Central America (laughs). And then after you explain that and then tell them, well, this is who I am. I am a Garifuna. I am a mixture of Native American and free African people. They're like, free African people? Black people were all slaves. And then you have to go into that detail of explaining who you are. It's just sometimes when I ask my people, well how do you explain yourself, it's just a lot easier for them to just assume that I'm African American cuz it's just too much to explain, but I'm very proud to explain I have no problem sitting down with anybody who will ask to just let them know who I am.

Athena: Very great. So why do think the Garifuna culture isn't better known, or more widespread known?

Cheryl: I think we're very protective of our culture. You know for good reason. In the past we have been... we're a very welcoming community and we have often, you know, welcomed people into our community that may not ummm... have the best interests of the community at hand and have kind of depicted us in their way of just, you know, just different things that, that have nothin' to do with us and with that, you know the Garifuna people tend to be a little bit protective of their culture because you know... you know, we're very proud people. You know and we wear our pride of our culture, you know, outwards. So once you insult that culture and our identity and who we are.... it's kind of just better to keep the outside people out. But in that then we are in this kind of sheltered community where nobody knows about us and then we wonder, well how come nobody knows about us, but it's because of our own doing. We're like very very protective of our culture.

Athena: How are you... tell us your role as a Garifuna woman. And maybe... I know you're doing a lot of things that are maybe people would say are more American because you work full time and you're studying. How do you balance your role as a...a woman in America and woman, a Garifuna woman as well?

Cheryl: (laughs) Well, being a Garifuna woman here in America, it is a juggling act because traditionally woman are like, you know, the men are more of the face of the Garifuna. You tend to see them more where the Garifuna women are the ones who are preserving the culture, but usually the face of the culture, everything Garifuna tends to be a man. And the women kind of take a backseat to all of that, so we do everything as far as preserving the culture, teaching it to our children and everything like that, but it's usually the men are in the forefront, but I think that the difference with me is being that I was raised up here in America and I do have that upbringing of men and women are created equally and it's not necess... necessary for a woman to always be in the background. You know, I tend to do a lot of stuff, you know, in the background as far as the organization... I make sure that the organization is kind of running smoothly. But, I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty. I will not ask of anybody who works with the organization to do something that I am not willing to do. You know, so everything I am involved in every part of the culture, the Garifuna community has to offer, I'm there. I'm willing to work with everybody in the community and everybody knows me from either from the time I was a child... they're like I knew you when you were young, to now I know you as a woman, as a leader, or whatnot. You know, so I'm not just like hidden in the background and letting all the men take credit (laughs).

Athena: I like that. Ummm... I have other questions... do you have other questions Ben?

Ben: No... I'm loving everything you're doing.

Athena: Ummm... I wanted to ask you... ummm... tell us about your last name. It's kind of interesting because it's almost Spanish, but it's.... so tell us a little bit about how you got it.

Cheryl: Yes, my last name Noralez--- N-O-R-A-L-E-Z. Not mistaken for Morales. Usually it gets mistaken a lot for Morales. Morales is Spanish. M-O-R-A-L-E-S is a Spanish last name, but we are uniquely Noralez N-O-R-A-L-E-Z. You'll find that Garifuna common... that is a common Garifuna last name in Honduras, Guatemala and Belize. And you know, usually people will try to switch it off for Morales, but it's it's Noralez. And of course, when I tell people my last name, it's a Spanish last name... your masters must have been Spanish. And it's like no, that's not it. According to oral history and the stories that I've heard from my elders and everything, when Garifuna people were exiled from St. Vincent to Roatan, you know Honduras, we were on a barren island and in order to get permission from the Spanish to go the mainland, you know because of all the stories, the negativity that they'd heard about the Garifuna being everything from devil worshippers to everything under the sun. You know, the Spanish people were scared of us. So in order for them to help us, they had to baptize us, you know and with that they gave us Spanish last names, so that's how we were able to get Spanish last names, not through slavery or anything. It was through necessity to get from the, you know, the barren land to the mainland so we were able to, you know, grow to the community that we're on now.

Athena: Anything else?

Ben: I think that's good.

Athena: Cheryl, that was great. Do you have anything else you want to say about the organization or anything we missed maybe?

Cheryl: I don't think we talked about the school, the other portions of that.

Athena: yes, thank you, I knew there was something we were missing. So, tell us about the school and how you got that started and all of that.

Cheryl: Umm... we started the school initially in two thousand five at a local college (audio cuts)

Ben: OK, we're running again.

Athena: OK, so tell us about the school.

Cheryl: The school initially started in two thousand five at mopalta cultural center that no longer exists today and we have the school there with our original teachers being Melecio

Gonzalez, ummm... Mr. Clifford Palacio and umm... Don Minko Alvarez. We had the school there every Saturday... we would meet there. We would have these excellent classes. But at that time it was integrated. It was children and adults, so you could kind of see it was just a little bit challenging because, you know... often times when you mix children and adults, the children get neglected, but it was able to work. What I did find was that the parents would sit next to their children... it was basically a family gathering, so the the way to describe the way the school was... the families came there with their children. And then you would here the grandmother and the parents like correcting their children how to say the words. It was a sight. It was a very beautiful sight to see. Like, literally in front of you fa... in front of your face. You know, just the generations being handed down from, from parents to grandparents and everything when they would normally not necessarily do that otherwise. But the school allowed them to do that and when we lost the school over there we were able to be welcomed at the Blazer learning center. You know, by Mr. Benny Davenport who allowed us the use of their facility to continue to the school there, which we currently have our beginning class with Mr. Dale Aranda, he teaches the kids of course incorporating the drumming and everything. We have the intermediate class with Mr. Mingo Alvarez who teaches pretty much people who may not be familiar with the language or who may actually know the language, but not necessarily speak the language. You know, a little familiarity, but he teaches and focuses on the adults. You know, and then we have the advanced class with Mr. Ruben Reyes and these are people who are fluent in Garifuna and who may not necessarily read and write in Garifuna. So, they take it to the very next level. And also as part of GAHFU we do have a Garifuna dance ensemble with Ms. Erica Zuniga Chipman who is absolutely a godsend. I mean she is able to just... just you know, work with this group of people and just make the culture come alive. And also Dale works as our instructor, our singing instructor and he's able to just make the voice of our ancestors just, you know, eliberate... it just liberates all of us when we hear the songs. It's just... you know... it's jubilant, it's exciting. it's just spiritual when we're all sining and when this group of people get together it's just absolutely amazing to see a group of, you know, people in their mid thirties on, carrying on the next generation of songs and traditions and you know. When I see that take place every Saturday, you know, I have a true belief, you know that's it's not our doing, it's a higher purpose and it's for us to continue, you know preserving and that's kind of you know who we are at GAHFU and as, as Garifuna, continuing, you know to preserve our culture from the next generation on. We're doing it now, we're preserving it, protecting it so the next generation will have it for them, waiting for them.

Athena: Why do you do what you do then Cheryl, what is the motivation?

Cheryl: The motivation, you know, I always say it's a selfish motivation cause when I initially started this, looking at it and everything, as a parent I said "I don't want my children not to know who they are". You know, I always want my children, like my parents taught me "You are Garifuna, de-?-Garifuna-bagea, you know, you are Garifuna, you know you're here in America but don't forget you're Garifuna. And being raised up and having that instilled in you, knowing how proud my parent were and the stories that my parents told me of the struggles and the sacrifice that our ancestors made in order for us to maintain our identity. You know, it means so much to me as an individual to not share that

with my, with my children, you know. So for me to just, not, you know, let my children know, you know, a part of their heritage, you know, to me it would be a neglect, you know, it would be a neglect. It would deny them something that is so uniquely theirs. You know, and it's not just the Garifuna... my son is also mixed with Chinese so it's also, you know, emphasizing, "You are a mixture of beautiful blends. You have to know your Chinese heritage cause that's a beautiful heritage. As well as your Garifuna heritage, your Guatemalan heritage, your Belizian heritage, you have to know all of that stuff. You know it's those parts that make you a unique individual". So I really think it's important for every child, regardless of where they come from, that it's very important for their parents, their grandparents, to sit down with them and let them know about their cultural identity. Because if you don't know who you are, you know, that's the piece of your soul, of your essence, that's missing. When we come and we migrate to any country, you know, "When in Rome you do as the Romans" but then you lose a piece of yourself if you forget who you are. So it's very important for every culture, not just the Garifuna, but every culture in the world to just kind of get back, have that conversation with your grandparents and know your lineage, know your heritage, and preserve your culture.

Athena: I love that. That was awesome.

Ben: That was amazing.

-End of audio-