

## Rita Palacio Los Angeles Interview

Ben: Go ahead and say and spell your name.

Rita: Rita R-I-T-A Palacio P-A-L-A-C-I-O

Ben: Ok great. And one I get this all good. You will just talk to me the entire time. Just look at and talk to me um. Tell me about your story, where did you grow up that sort of thing.

Rita: Ok I was born in Dangriga and I'm an only child. My mom migrated to Progreso which is an Indian village in Corozal district. And the purpose of her going to Progreso was because she had a sister there who had gotten married to the village teacher, I mean the, a teacher and she became very sick and eventually bedridden. So my mom volunteered to stay and take care of her sister uh. After so many years after she passed away, she still stayed there, but I attended school in Progreso. I was only three years old when we went to Progreso. And I attended school there with all and then Spanish speaking speaking children. So as a result, I can say my first language was Spanish. My mom spoke Garifuna to me at home, so I understood quite a number, I mean, I understood Garifuna, but I did not respond in Garifuna whenever she speak to me. Then I didn't have any friends that spoke Garifuna and that even made it worse. And then that's why when I went back to Dangriga I was twelve years old and I couldn't speak the language. I was teased by some of my friends in school because I spoke Spanish and um English. But I guess because I had, my mom spoke Garifuna to me, it took some time for me to start talking, but I learned the language through talking to my friends and um. After I got married Cliff wanted us to speak Garifuna to the children, so he wanted me to learn Garifuna, so he started teaching me Garifuna. And that is how I learned most of my Garifuna.

Ben: Very good. Um, so tell me about how did you feel as you were learning it, because obviously this is your culture, your heritage and you kind of grew up without knowing it.

Rita: Yes, I didn't really know it because like I said, I was in an Indian village and I was sometimes the only black child in school most of the time except when the police, when there would be a change of policeman and they would have kids, they would have children that would attend school so that's and most of the time they were creole speaking families that you know would go to in Progreso. So it was really difficult for me.

Ben: How did it make you feel I guess once you got older and you learned about Garifuna culture, who you were, where you came from, how did that make you feel to know that sort of heritage.

Rita; Uh, it was mixed feelings. Because em in school we did not, we were not allowed really to speak Garifuna and uh well the kids spoke it outside. And the and I em I started to realize that I was a Garifuna and I started to appreciate more my culture cuz after knowing your heritage that's when you really learn how to appreciate your own culture. And my friends, like I said, they helped me by talking a Garifuna to me. So eventually it became a

part of my vocabulary, I started talking Garifuna. Even though it was like my husband said, up to now... it's a hard language. And up to now there are times, because I learned more Garifuna from him, I speak more the way a man would speak instead of how there are certain words that female don't use is the male that would use that word, but I speak more like a male. He would do, he would correct me. And even my friends, they like to hear the way I speak Garifuna because they say that it is not uh there are certain words that I use that is not really like I said, what the female should use. So they would tease me about that.

Ben: Tell me about some of the differences there, why is there a difference between male and female words?

Rita: Like for instance instead of saying naguya, that's a female. The male would say, oyu. For me, naguya. You know. And um there are many words that are females female words and masculine words and I don't really know the differences, so my husband would be able to explain the female words, and the masculine words. Because I learned more usage, that's all you understand that this one is female and just like Spanish. you know the words ending in A are would be female and the words ending in o would be masculine, so Garifuna has that same tendency.

Ben: Tell me about the roles of women in Garifuna society. Like, what do women do within this culture?

Rita: Within the culture. Ok. Most of the women are what should I say, don't work because there weren't any except for when they work in people's homes you know and they were very few of them. Most of them are stay at home. And em they go to the farm and they take care the children and they take care of their husbands. And what they were not really employed uh-huh. It depended more on the husbands.

Ben: And tell me what do the women do as far as cooking, as far as raising the kids, give me like who who are these Garifuna women?

Rita: I am a Garifuna woman. (laughs). I am like we have cultural foods like we said, hudutu we have tapoa, which is bananas, cooked in in coconut milk and fish. We have duraza we have em duraza, dani, we have dani we budiga um. I don't know to cook that. Some foods I don't really know to cook it, but like hudutu, budiga duraza, I don' think that I have ever cooked duraza. And em and again that's because of my Spanish background. My mom, well I like tortillas and I know a lot of Spanish dishes uh like enchiladas, tortillas, tamales, em chimole, Spanish dishes. And that's what I cook for the kids too, it's a mixture of foods. I don't really cook just just Garifuna foods.

Ben: Tel me um how is the the food play in the culture overall?

Rita: It's our main diet. How the food is different from the Creoles they don't really, well now they start cooking hudutu but in the beginning, it's not really their their dish. it's a Garifuna dish. uh-huh.

Ben: So is that... like if your were to take the food out of the culture, what would be lost? Like what building block in the culture, other than nourishment, yea because there are just like some very cultural Garifuna foods. What building block of the culture are those? Does that make sense?

Rita: That's a hard one. Yeah. Well, for some people, like I said, who are very cultural, they cook Garifuna food almost every day or a different one every day, but in my case, I don't because that's not the way my mom raised me. You know and it acted upon me because when (out?) my mom when we went back to Dangriga and I stayed with my aunt, I had a problem with the foods. I couldn't eat the same food every day and my aunt would scold me and say that I am spoiled, which is not so because my mom didn't cook it every day, you know. She really lived a culture, I mean a different way. And em it was hard on me when my mom went away and left me with my aunt. She went to Chetemal and she was working with a white family and I stayed with my aunt and since I'm an only child. And I'm a single parent child, you know so it was really hard for me. Uh adjusting to the culture in Dangriga or the way my aunt lived yeah. Cuz they were not well, they were not rich but it was really hard on them so they cooked almost the same thing every day or. And I just couldn't... I couldn't handle it. And there was a Creole neighbor that I had, she would call me and cuz I would sit out and cry sometimes when I come from school and she would call me and give me a plate of rice and beans or shoe beans and, I mean, strewer or I mean fish and rice or something and to me, I up to now am so grateful to those people. Because I could say that they really helped me while my mom was away you know we were just neighbors, but they saw the difference and knew the difference. So they would call me and my aunt would get mad because I would cry then somebody else would have to come and give me food so she would get mad at me. But that was just life for me.

Ben: How has, because you grew up in Belize. How is life different for your kids here in the United States?

Rita: Here in the states. First of they have to adjust when they came here they had to adjust to school life and the life here and em, it was a bit har, difficult for them, but I don't think it was too much the difference that they they acculturation was too much for them. because of the way we lived in Dangriga. Because when we were there, both of us are teachers so and then what we earned so far is for the family while we are there. And it was a little different from those whose parents did not work so the life wasn't too strange for them, you know. It was just when they go out to work or where they started working, they had already adjusted because they came as as um, they came young so.

Ben: Tell me about your family. You've raised some pretty successful kids, one has a Ph.D and that sort of thing. How does it make you feel to know, well first of all tell me about your kids where are they? You've got one in the NBA, tell me about them.

Rita; Yes, yes Ok Joycelyn is um, she's the one that the Ph.D. and she works at the um, at city hope hospital is where she works, as a... here Ph.D. was in instructional what is it again, uhm, instructional technology yes. And em, she works in that field there in the hospital and then em. The one that came in just now the oldest boy he does computers, he works with

computers and then the other second boy John he works with a airplane company cause he was in the service and then he. So they work in, he works in Atlanta, making the windows, plane windows, so. Greg, that's the artist and he also used to work at the Delta, airlines, and Cheryl, that's the other girl, she's in Virginia she got married too. She was in the air, in the service and she got married to somebody who is also in the military. And em, she works and she has two actually she has two degrees. Em, BA degrees, she has one in em in finance and one innn what is it again, administration working in the hospital. So, that would be her title. And then she works in, as a matter of fact she works in Virginia she said not too far from the White House from where she works you can see the White House because she works at the Veteran's Hospital. Then I have another one who works at AT&T here another boy who works at AT&T. And then I have a girly girl here she's just through cosmetology. And em, any other ones? Those are all our... and Milton he does the NBA.

Ben: National Basketball Association?

Rita: Yeah, he does the basketball.

Ben: Where does he play?

Rita: He was playing, he was in Greece just came from Greece.

Ben: And before that?

Rita: And before that he played with em the Jaz... with Jazz he played at what else where? Vancouver, he played in Toronto yeah. He played with ehm Cleveland, Boston, about seven different teams he played with.

Ben: Wow, how does it make you feel that your son just a kid from parents from Belize. He grew up here in LA. He's been in the NBA on national television.

Rita: You know, I think what happened was when there, when they were young we em insisted that they study and he even though he had a basketball court here, my husband used to watch and see the kids that would come over and play. And if they would start with any profanity or what he would tell them go away and don't come back. Or he would correct them. And em, also we were very strict with the company they kept and even though they had their privacy here, I would go now and then and check and see what they have or what they doing. You know, we were very strict with them. And at the same time we were religious, we go to church on Sundays. And I think that that helped to curve the way that we lived, yes.

Ben: Very good uhm. I think I had one more question for you.

Rita: And like I said we were both teachers so that helped me to deal with different situations cause we, that's the only thing I did. I've been a teacher, I was a teacher for almost thirty years, even here I taught when I came here.

Ben: What did you teach here?

Rita: I teach in an em foundation for federal it is em what are preschool whereas I taught for I taught for about a year or two and then I became a supervisor and from that that's all I did, more supervision, so uh I taught in Well heights for almost five or six years, Spanish speaking people. Area is mostly Spanish. So when I had meetings, I didn't need anybody to come and uh translate for me, I had I did my meetings in English and Spanish. And the parents, when the first time they heard me, they eyes wide wide open because they were surprised to hear me speak fluent Spanish and em. I was able to relate to them more too, and they appreciated me more too because I knew their language.

Ben: Very good. One more question. You said as we were kind of wandering around the house um about when your kids get together um, all the grandkids and everything, there isn't any prejudice or anything. Um tell me more about that. I mean you've got this big, you called it United Nations family. Tell me about this United Nations family.

Rita: When we have like, when they come here. They all get along and like I told my same cousin who was here I said em, how is it that you have such a good rapport with your daughters in law. And I said, I love all of them. Even all my children as, regardless of what who they are, I said, I love them. And they react to me the same way. So you find that whenever we have parties they would bring, each person would bring a dish and we would all enjoy the food, different dishes, from different dishes and even the ones that belong to different culture we speak our language in front of them. We tell, we try to have them understand what we are saying, so it doesn't really I would tell me friends even this have a, one of my daughters in law she is white and I have one from Louisiana (laughs). I have one from Canada but em but all of all of I can relate to all of them. And they also are close to me. Uh huh, they are close to me.

Athena: So my question is do you miss Belize, do you miss your homeland. And you can talk to my husband.

Rita: Now and this, now and then I do miss... now we visit, we go to Belize very very often we go and visit, you know.

Ben: But you do miss it?

Rita: Really, yes I do.

Ben: You all have a house there, tell me about your house.

Rita: Well, we enjoy when we go visiting at home because em, because we have our own facilities there, so it's nice going there and I have my cousins staying there so.

Ben: So you have family all over?

Rita: yes, yes.

Ben: Great, what what this will be the last one, there's always one more right. What do you hope will happen, what do you hope is your legacy?

Rita: Well, I guess it would be like uh let's see for my children to live, to continue living the life that they are doing and to remember that the background that they had and continue their religious, that is one thing that I really would like them to do.

Ben: Very good, very good.