

Oregon State University's Women's Center Staff Oral History Group Interview, Spring Term 2015

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Interviewees: Amelia Allee, Shelby Baisden, Soreth Dahri, Nicthé Verdugo

Interviewer: Amelia Allee

Transcriber: Avery Sorensen

Amelia Allee: AA Shelby Baisden: SB Soreth Dahri: SD Nicthé Verdugo: NV

[00:00:00]

AA: This seat's really comfortable. Okay, um, so I guess I'll just do one question at a time. What is your name, and please spell it out loud?

SB: We're going this way.

AA: Okay, I'll start. My name is Amelia Allee. A-M-E-L-I-A, A-L-L-E-E.

SB: And my name is Shelby Baisden. S-H-E-L-B-Y, B-A-I-S-D-E-N

SD: My name is Soreth Dahri. S-O-R-E-T-H, D-A-H-R-I.

NV: And I am Nicthé Verdugo. It's N-I-C-T-H-E. And my last name is V as in Victor, E-R-D-U-G-O.

AA: Thank you. What is your hometown or where is home to you? Um, my hometown is Denver, but my home officially is Portland, Oregon.

SB: My hometown is Gresham, but I will call home Portland and/or Corvallis.

SD: My hometown is Karachi, Pakistan. That's my home.

NV: My hometown would be Chandler, Arizona, and I would probably call my home Corvallis.

AA: Nice. It's nice to see so many people are home. What is your age, year in school, and major? Uh, I'm 20 years old, this is my third year at school, and I'm a public health major with a focus in health management and policy, and I'm also working on the certificate of food and culture and social justice.

SB: Age, year, school, and major, yeah?

AA: Yeah.

SB: Sorry, I got lost in all that. I am, I'm 22. I'm a senior this year. My school is public health and human sciences, I'm studying human development and family sciences. Yeah.

SD: Um, I'm 21, and this my second year, and I'm studying finance in the college of business.

NV: And I'm 22, I'm also a senior, college of liberal arts studying ethnic studies and a minor in women, gender, and sexuality studies.

AA: With which ethnicities and/or races do you identify? French, English, and Huron.

SB: Um. I'm not really connected to my ethnic groups quite honestly. I most just identify as white, but I do have a lot of German and Dutch in me.

SD: I identify mostly as Muslim, Pakistani.

NV: I identify myself as Chicana.

AA: Um, what is your position at the women's center, what do you do, and how many years have you worked for the women's center? I guess this isn't really like a dialogue piece. But, I'm currently peer facilitator and next year I'll be a leadership liaison. And this is my first year in Corvallis and at OSU and at the women's center.

SB: Um, so I'm a communications rep. This is my first year working for the center. I worked with the center last year as a part of my other position, and that's how I got connected to the center.

SD: This is my first year work—this is my first year work—sorry--working as a peer facilitator at the women's center. And before that, I used to attend the events, but I was not really working, so I was connected last year too.

NV: This is actually my second year working at the women's center. My first year was program coordinator, so creating the events. Um, and then this year I am the leadership liaison, so one of the mentors, one of the many mentors for the current staff at the women's center.

AA: Have you worked for any other cultural resource centers—when and what positions? Not on this campus. Worked for the women's resource center at Portland Community College at the Sylvania campus as a student advocate.

SB: I haven't worked for any other cultural resource centers other than just collaborating with them.

SD: Yeah, same here. I haven't worked with any other cultural resource center.

NV: Me neither, nope.

AA: I don't know what's going on outside, it's really starting to irritate me. Why did you decide to work at the women's center?

SB: Um, I decided to work at the women's center because I felt like it was a safe space where I could really, just, feel myself. I hadn't really felt that many other places on campus, and I felt like it was an inclusive space where anyone who walked in could feel comfortable. And, I agreed with their mission and I loved, um, their outlook on feminism and how important that was. And, like, social justice theory that we apply to our work. And, that was just really appealing to me.

[00:04:58]

SD: Yeah I agree with that. My major reason why I started working here or I applied to the women's center was also that when I came here, I felt really comfortable. I felt that it was a very safe space for, especially, women, although its gender inclusive. I felt comfortable sitting here and spending time here. Um, and I really liked the environment and the purpose and the mission as Shelby said. Um, yeah.

NV: I guess I'll go. I guess for me, I was doing a lot of activist working surrounding, like my ethnic background and not really, necessarily, recognizing my gender identity. And so, I wanted to, like, really push myself to really learn more about what feminism meant to me. And so, after I got involved, I think that was where I kind of changed my perspective about how I identify myself. So.

AA: Um, last year when I worked at the women's resource center at Portland Community College, I grew so much as an adult and as a person. And when I was moving on to a four year school, I just wasn't ready to give that up. And, honestly, the first day I was on campus, I found the women's center and it was, like, the second to last day to apply for this job. And I just thought that, um, I could really learn a lot from working here and continuing that legacy. Um, guess that kind of goes into the next question. What have been your challenges working at the women's center and how have you overcome them?

SD: That's a hard question.

AA: Yeah.

SB: Yeah.

NV: The challenges?

AA: Yeah.

SB: I've enjoyed it so much. I'm kind of baffled by that question. I mean, I think any time you're a student leader, balance is always an issue. I am so dedicated to the work I do here that—and my position is different than the peer facilitator's—but, I'm so dedicated to my job here that I find myself, like, I don't want to do homework I want to do work for the women's center, you know. And, I mean, you have to find, you have to always find that balance as a student leader. Um, as far as a challenge from working here, I think I, I invite people here a lot, and then as soon as they hear the name "women's center," immediately a label is put on our space. And, depending who I'm talking to, that can be positive and/or negative. And a lot of times it is negative. And, um, I think it's just something we have to try to overcome, is really teaching people what we're about, our purpose, being like, no, this is a safe space where you are welcome. Um, I think that's a challenge, just trying to get people in here.

NV: I agree.

SD: Me too. Yeah, and like, people are not really sure about our purpose. So, they perceive feminism as something not positive, and that is not true because they're not really aware of what actually we're working towards. We're working towards equality and not dominating them, or dominating men, or making them feel inferior. But, basically, feminism does not mean what they are thinking. So, just the lack of knowledge also is a challenge because people do not perceive you as a person of, you know, working towards equality, rather a person who is trying to get dominated over other populations. So, that's kind of a challenge too, just spreading awareness or keep making people realize the truth. Um.

AA: Well I think that even though the women's center's specifically a female focused space, this year I've had to challenge my, my white identity and the privilege that comes along with that. At my last job, I didn't feel like I had to do that so much, but this year I've struggled with that. But I think that I've finally, actually within the last couple weeks, started to get over my white guilt, and I'm starting to move into doing something about it. And that's been really powerful for me.

SB: That's awesome.

SD: That's great.

AA: Um, what projects, events, activities, etc. would you like to have seen and/or would you recommend for the future? More about sexual assault awareness.

SB: Absolutely.

NV: Not just the month.

AA: Not just—exactly. That's what I was just going to say, not just a month because it doesn't just happen one month a year. I was really kind of astonished when I moved here how little is done about that. And that falls on me too because I have the option to do those events. But I'd like to see more in the future.

SB: Definitely, yeah.

[00:09:58]

NV: Maybe also different perspectives about what feminism means to different communities just because we are so used to knowing more about the feminists that were upper, you know, white communities. And so now, what does it mean to be a person of color within the feminist movement, and is the feminist movement still this western ideology where we're trying to fit into? And so, it's kind of just like having that discussion of what it looks like to different communities. So.

SB: I think, along with what you just said, like, more events on the historical context of it. I can't say it better than the way you said it. Like, I think the misconceptions about feminism come from not understanding it. And so, we need to not only give the historical reference, but analyze it at the same time. And events certainly that I think would help, um, and trying to bring people in and being like, no, here, listen to us this is really what it's about. And there's different waves of feminism. There's just so much of it that you just need to break it all down so people understand why we stand for what we stand for.

AA: So many layers.

SD: Yeah, I think these are two big areas where we really need to focus. Like, clarifying the definitions of the terms that we are using as well as focusing more on issues like sexual assault, and what's happening, and what we can do about it, and just spreading awareness about it in the community, and how they can keep themselves protected. Not only women, but also men because the ratio is almost the same, it's actually increasing. So it's really sad to know.

AA: And, what advance would you give future women's center staff and/or OSU cultural resource center staff? Come in with an open mind.

NV: I agree.

SB: Absolutely.

AA: I think—and that's way easier said than done, but I think that if you work in a CRC or you work in the women's center, hopefully you're learning. And, if you're not learning, it's probably because of not being open to new experiences you're being exposed to because there's so much to take in in this work. And, so coming in with an open mind and knowing that it's a safe space and that people intend to do well, to do good by you. So just...

SB: I think along with what you said, like, being prepared that you will be challenged. Like, your, your ways of thinking, your ideas, your—things will be challenged, and it's not in a negative way either. It's meant to make you grow. And, um, just being prepared for that because I've changed a lot since I've started here, and I think for the better. Um, but it, I mean, you

definitely have growing pains, but it's good in the end, at least to me. I have a lot more to do. I have a lot more to grow in, but yeah.

NV: Oh, okay. So I guess for me, it's like, doing everything with good intentions. Being, along with being, you know, open minded and being able to challenge yourself and being ready to be challenged, it's also, it's work that you're contributing to the community, so do it with good intentions. Do it with a purpose. And so, I think that will make a bigger impact than just having to just throw out events without that, that purpose behind it. So.

All: Yeah.

SD: I think that, like, everything is always said. I agree with all that she was saying because the work here is not, actually I don't feel like this is work. I enjoy doing it, it's part of real life. So, just embracing all that's happening around. And um, yeah. Like you said, coming with an open mind and just keeping a positive attitude is what is required. I think that's all that is required because if you're here, you're still learning. We are not experts or something, but we're students and we're the progress system. So, just coming with the mindset of that. Um.

AA: Absolutely. Based on working at the women's center, what is the take away that you gained that you would like to share with others?

SB: Where do we begin?

NV: I guess not being afraid to challenge certain systems that are already set in place just because I've grown more as an activist in that form in terms of what I've gained through the center. So really, not being afraid of speaking up when need, when it needs to be, to happen. And to, even if you are part of the, you know, the workforce, I guess, of the university, you still have that voice and to use while you can at the university, you can make a change. I would say that would be it.

[00:15:06]

AA: I think also to not be so afraid to break down barriers in your own mind, in your own life. To challenge these ideas that we have set in place before we even came to Corvallis. Um, I think that's been a struggle for me, but I think it gets easier the more barriers you break down, the easier. You've got momentum going and you can just keep going and grow.

SB: Can you read the question one more time?

AA: Yeah. Um, based on working at the women's center, what is the take away that you gained that you would like to share with others?

SB: I mean, I think it's just changed my life across all levels, you know. A lot of the reasons because of what you two said, like being not afraid to challenge something and also challenging

yourself. But, I think it's made my relationships a lot better. It's given me a clearer sense of who I am and what I stand for, um, which I, I was more lost, I think, before I found that. Like, I think I was searching for, kind of, this social justice mentality before I came here, I just couldn't find it. I didn't have those resources. And this was my resource. And so, I think just like, I don't know, it's just changed me overall.

SD: What I, like, gained from working here was that nobody should ever generalize or stereotype because I have faced a lot of difficulties with being in the country so far away from home. But, I've realized that not everyone is the same. And, I want people to know that as well. That generalizing is the worst thing that a person can do. Um, so just be proud of yourself or your identity, and, just, think and know that there are people who will support you and who are with you. So, just do not think that everyone in any race is the same because there are good people and bad people everywhere. Um, so that's something that I realized. And I try to tell people that no, not white people, all white people are not the same, all black people are not the same, all Muslims are not the same. So, just do not generalize.

AA: Can you describe your thoughts on why sharing your stories is important to your identity? I don't want to speak for anybody else, but, um, uh, women's stories aren't often told. And, I think that the people in this room represent different identities that aren't heard from and frequently are omitted from the story. So, I think that we need to actively go out there and say we exist, we have a voice, it matters, and if you're willing to listen, we're willing to teach you.

SB: Yeah.

SD: Exactly.

NV: That's perfect.

SB: Is there anything else to say? You tell 'em, honey.

AA: Alright.

NV: Next question.

AA: Ah, I love to laugh. Can you—can you describe your experiences at OSU pertaining to your identities that have been particularly impactful and/or negative? Or both?

NV: Is impactful positive in this?

AA: I guess, positive, negative, or impactful.

NV: Okay.

SB: I think an identity that I've become more aware of, which you talked about earlier, is just my white identity and being in a white space as a predominantly white university. And, I never had to question that before I came here. And I wouldn't have questioned it unless I would've gotten involved with the work here and the work I've done previously. Um, and I'm constantly thinking about my interactions with people, and the things I've internalized and how I impact individuals I work with. I think my identity as a woman as well is also very salient to me because I feel like I have privilege in my racial identity but not so much in my gender identity. And I think I relatively feel safe here, but there have been many times where it's apparent that, "okay this is happening because of my gender." Including in classes not being taken seriously by my male classmates, like I'm playing a joke on them or something. It's like, well no, I'm trying to do work here. Um, or just different things like that. I think those are two identities that are really salient to me.

[00:19:53]

SD: That I think that or my identity I would say—the people that impacted me here in the United States were mostly the domestic residents of Corvallis because I had come with the mindset that—you know how the media shows, like, people are, they don't like you, they hate Muslims, or they will not respect you. So I was, my family, they were concerned about my safety and protection. But when I came here, I came across so many nice people. They were so welcoming, they were so accepting, that I was like, I told my parents that this is not the same. And, it totally changed my mindset and the way I thought about U.S. Although it is happening in many other places, it still exists here, but the good thing is that it's not on the larger scale as I was thinking. So these people really impacted me and it, they changed the way of, the way I thought about people in the United States. And I'm, like, really positive impacted by them and their ways of life, and their attitudes toward other cultures and diverse group of peoples, especially students. So, yeah.

AA: Um, it's kind of hard for me to speak to this question because, like I said earlier, this is my first year at OSU, and I've always worked in the women's center. And I don't go outside of the women's center to associate with people a lot. I'm kind of a homebody. So, my experiences are limited to my interactions with people within the CRCs, which I imagine looks very different from out there.

SD: Yeah.

AA: I feel like people cat call a lot less here than in Denver. Like, I could not walk down the street, I could not leave the, my house without being afraid. But, here in Oregon in general, that hasn't happened even a fraction as much as where I grew up, which I thought was interesting.

SB: I have nothing to relate it to because I haven't lived anywhere else, but I've been cat called here a couple times. But, not to the extent of what you're describing.

AA: What issues do you think are most relevant, i.e. in need of discussion and/or action to students who identify as females at OSU?

SB: Can you read it one more time?

AA: Yeah. Uh, what issues do you think are most relevant to students who identify as female at OSU? I think on every campus sexual assault is an issue.

NV: Yeah.

SB: Yeah, that's the first thing that came to my mind.

NV: But I feel like it, it just, I guess the question wording is, like, everything is relevant, so why should we put something above anything else?

AA: Yeah. As most relevant.

NV: Because it's something more common I guess, speaking about sexual assault and sexual violence. But in other communities, what does that look like? What other, what're other salient circumstances that they face? I wouldn't have a specific one for that.

SD: Because like, yeah, there are many, like, you can relate to. And there's not a single that is greater or more than another one. Even gender inequity of women at work, women at different institutions, how they're treated and how they're perceived, it's in all matters.

AA: Transwomen

All: Yeah.

SD: And, the thing that happened in Baltimore is a reflection of how, like, what's going on in society, and how unaware the society is of our issues.

AA: Um, so I guess that's the eternal question for people in this work, right? Like, what, what do we need to focus on right now? What's the most pressing? And, what can we afford to take care of next week?

All: Yeah.

AA: Only two more questions. Is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to add?

SB: I just want to echo, like, how much--we just have an amazing staff. We have amazing people here, and I love you all. And um, I really hope that every single year, whoever works here, they're as close as we've become this year. I'm going to start crying, but. But no, seriously, like, I--you all are just great.

[00:25:00]

SD: Yeah my experience is...

NV: Continue.

SD: No, but yeah. I can totally relate to that. I think all of us can. Um, I don't want to speak for others, but I think all of us can because we're so happy. When it's it time to work, I'm like, I'm going home. It gives that feeling, you know. It's not the pressure, it's not anything that you're forced to do. In fact, we have like this bond and emotional connection. It's great working at the women's center.

AA: It's like a home away from home because I know no one in this room has family in Corvallis. And, family's awfully far away for all of us. So, especially for some of us. So, I mean, just having a group of people that you know care about you on shift, off shift, whenever you need somebody, they're there. They're just a text away.

SB: That's true.

SD: Yeah, someone who understands you, who's there to listen to you, who is there to support you in whatever cause, whatever that you want to do. It feels good.

AA: Someone that will protest alongside of you. Someone that will laugh at you when you fall.

SB: Hold a sign.

NV: It's happened. Yeah.

AA: And, do you have any closing thoughts that you'd like to share? I mean, I felt like that was some.

SB: Sorry, I jumped ahead.

AA: No, no, no. I think they're highly related.

AA: I'm lucky to have this place.

All: Yeah.

SB: Any closing remarks, narrator?

AA: Thank you for participating, and I'm going to shut the video off now. Watch, the video will have stopped a long time ago.

NV: No.

[end of interview 00:27:04]