Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Victoria Cintra

Interviewer: Linda VanZandt

Volume 1074
2006
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

VICTORIA CINTRA

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Victoria Cintra and is taking place on May 12, 2006. The interviewer is Linda VanZandt. Also present is a young immigrant from Veracruz, Mexico.

VanZandt: This is Linda VanZandt with the Center for Oral History at USM [University of Southern Mississippi]. Today is May 12, 2006, and I am here in downtown Biloxi at the offices of MIRA, which is Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance, with the organizing coordinator here in the Gulf Coast office, Victoria Cintra. Did I pronounce that correctly?

Cintra: You did great.

VanZandt: C-I-N-T-R-A? OK.

Cintra: You did wonderful.

VanZandt: And her husband Elvis is here in the background, filing, busy working, and we also have present a young, sixteen-year-old boy. And he’s sixteen years old?

Cintra: Yes.

VanZandt: And where is he from?

Cintra: He’s from Mexico.

VanZandt: Where in Mexico? Do you know?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Veracruz, Mexico.

VanZandt: Veracruz, beautiful.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)
VanZandt: And how long has he been here?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: He’s been here eight months.

VanZandt: Eight months, OK.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: He came because of [Hurricane] Katrina.

VanZandt: That’s what I thought, eight months; that sounds about right.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: First he went to New Orleans, and then he came here.

VanZandt: And how did you arrive in New Orleans?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: He came in with a group of workers with a company by the name of Enstar(?).

VanZandt: Enstar, OK. Are you familiar with that company?

Cintra: Yes.

VanZandt: Can you tell me a little bit about that company? Where they’re based.

Cintra: Well, right now I have a claim against them because they owe a whole bunch of workers a whole bunch of money.

VanZandt: And where are they based, Vickie? Are they local?
Cintra: No, they’re not.

VanZandt: That’s OK, if you don’t know offhand.

Cintra: Yeah. I don’t know offhand.

VanZandt: So they’re out of state, though.

Cintra: They’re out of state. I think they’re in Atlanta. I want to say Atlanta, but I’m not sure.

VanZandt: And is this the first claim you’ve had against them? Or have you had other complaints?

Cintra: I have one claim, and it involves about seven workers. And we’re looking probably close to ten thousand dollars of outstanding back wages. But I mean, he’s not actually complaining about them. He’s just telling us that that company brought him into—

VanZandt: Brought him here.

Cintra: —New Orleans with a group of workers.

VanZandt: Absolutely.

Cintra: Yeah.

VanZandt: Well, let’s get back to why he was here, as so many—well, Katrina’s opened the floodgates, basically, the aftermath, for people to come in because there’s such a huge demand for manual labor, primarily. And it’s just opened the gates for all kinds of fraud and abuse and exploitation, and this is a perfect example here. And this is what you are dealing with on a daily basis.

Cintra: Right.

VanZandt: Can you tell me a little about what you are doing? Just speak to that.

Cintra: Well, you know, to understand why the floodgates were opened, we kind of have to go back. President [George W.] Bush, on the fourth or fifth day after the storm, instead of being concerned with, “Let’s put thousands of people on the ground to help the victims and the survivors of Katrina; let’s make sure we get water. Let’s make sure they got food and medical assistance and a house or temporary housing,” the first thing he did was to suspend the Davis-Bacon Act, repeal the Davis-Bacon Act, which is—

VanZandt: For those who don’t know, if you could tell—
Cintra: —a law that’s been on the books since, like, 1930, 1931, and it was started by Senator [James] Davis and Senator [Robert] Bacon, that basically protected prevailing wages for construction workers under federal contract and, of course, safety on the job and just benefits and all these kinds of things for the construction workers. And by him repealing that, contractors could basically pay people whatever they wanted or not pay them at all.

VanZandt: Which is what we hear happening so much now.

Cintra: Correct. I have to stop. (brief interruption) So by him repealing that, basically he made it open season on immigrant laborers, and really it affected everybody. It affected even people that were here working, African-Americans, Anglos. It affected everybody, you know. And though he reinstated it a month later, because of all the pressure from national organizations, he did not make it retroactive. So millions of dollars in contracts were done at very cheap labor and no regard for human safety or lives for that matter.

VanZandt: The damage had already been done.

Cintra: The damage had already been done.

VanZandt: You can’t go back.

Cintra: That’s right.

VanZandt: After that.

Cintra: As a matter of fact, very early on I had a case—you know, the hurricane hit August the twenty-ninth, and we were down on the ground. I mean, we were living here. We lost our home, my husband and I. But we were on the ground within a few days after the hurricane, handing out thousands and tens of thousands of leaflets in Spanish and in English, trying to help the immigrant community with the paperwork and getting the applications and things for FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] and Red Cross and all these other entities and agencies that would assist them. And within after about, I guess, two or three weeks, I started getting complaints from the Seabee [Naval Construction Battalion, CB] base because, you know, Gulfport has two bases. We have Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, and then in Gulfport, we have the Seabee Navy base, which they’re both federal installations. And I got complaints that there was approximately eighty-five workers that were—at the time I got the complaint, it was eighty-five workers—that were working inside the Seabee base, and some of them hadn’t gotten paid in as much as two, three, four weeks. So I started getting the complaints around mid-September, and it went on through the middle of October until, you know—and I started doing investigations. I got on the base twice.
VanZandt: And what did you find?

Cintra: I found that—well, when I actually was able to actually talk to workers outside of the base, it was thirty-five workers that we found in a trailer park that were—they hadn’t eaten in three days, that hadn’t drank any water. They were gaunt and burned and just weak, and I mean, it was sad. It was thirty-five people that were living between three abandoned trailers that had no electricity. Actually one of them had electricity, and what they did is they ran extension cords to the other trailers in order to get a light bulb. But there was no stoves; there was no refrigerators; there was no running water. There was no carpet; there was no furniture. These people were, like, twenty in one trailer, fifteen in another, and the rest in the other trailer. And there was roaches and mice and rats, and I mean it was just horrid conditions. I mean sub—I mean less than substandard.

VanZandt: And this is at a federal base.

Cintra: Well, yeah, but the ones, when they were living on base, they were in, you know, these big warehouses or hangars that they have on the base that are all concrete slab, and I mean, I have testimonies of the people that when they went to work—because what happened was the KBR [Kellogg, Brown, and Root] or Halliburton got the big contract for all the bases to do all of these cleanup and all that.

VanZandt: Right, multimillion dollars.

Cintra: Exactly. Well, they went and hired a sub, who hired another sub, who hired another sub, and then they hired the workers. So it was, like, four tiers down, and I had gotten all that information, and the workers, when they got to the base, first they gave them cots to sleep on, and either that very day or the next day, they took away those cots and made them sleep on concrete slab.

VanZandt: And what was their rationalization?

Cintra: They didn’t have a right to those cots. They weren’t human enough, I guess.

VanZandt: That’s what I was wondering. So it wasn’t a matter of, “Somebody else needs this more right now.”

Cintra: Yeah. So, and they weren’t getting fed; they were promised wages. Now, don’t think people came here because they were trying to drive down the wages. The people that came to work here with companies, they were offered—many were offered twelve and fifteen and eighteen dollars an hour.

VanZandt: Absolutely.

Cintra: They were offered per diems; they were offered a place to live.
VanZandt: Free housing, right. Meals.

Cintra: You know, so they didn’t come here thinking that they were going to make four dollars an hour or not be paid at all.

VanZandt: Which is a big hot-button issue, isn’t it?

Cintra: It is. So we have to really shift the blame to the contractors, to the Halliburtons, to the KBRs, to the Bush administration, to the other paramounts, and all the other five no-bid contracts that FEMA issued.

VanZandt: And tell me if this is correct. I can assume that a company like Halliburton might say, “Well, we don’t know what that subcontractor’s doing.” You know, they’re so far removed that they have no accountability. What is the relationship there between the subs—

Cintra: Well, that’s what the repeal of the Davis-Bacon Act did; there was no accountability. And they could wash their hands by saying, “I didn’t really hire the workers.” But you know what? They’re accountable.

VanZandt: Sure they are.

Cintra: Don’t you think they knew, or they should have had some idea? They were on the same base; they had their headquarters on the same base that these workers were being housed in.

VanZandt: Um-hm, but it’s an easy excuse, I think, for them. I can see that.

Cintra: Sure, and it was. Very early on, Bill Chandler, the executive director for MIRA, discussed with the Department of Labor [DOL]—because Mississippi’s the only state that doesn’t have a State Department of Labor.

VanZandt: Well, I was going to ask you that question, too, because I assumed that—

Cintra: We don’t.

VanZandt: —and did a little research and found that they didn’t, and I was shocked.

Cintra: We don’t; we’re the only state that doesn’t. We’ve been trying to get a Department of Labor for many years, and they keep squashing those bills.

VanZandt: So it makes groups like yours crucial to—

Cintra: Well, and not only my group, but people have no State Department of Labor to lean back on. They have to rely on the U.S. Department of Labor, which as you
know, minimum wage is [$5.15] an hour, and who can survive, let alone live, on [$5.15] an hour?

**VanZandt:** Yeah, and that doesn’t look like that’s going up any time soon.

**Cintra:** So Bill went ahead and made arrangement with the DOL in order for us to take in the complaints and give them to them, to the DOL, because people were afraid of federal agencies. Now, we have to face the reality; a lot of these people were nondocumented. And so they’re afraid any time they go (laughter) into a federal installation or a federal agency. The first thing that comes to their mind is, “I’m going to be deported.” So because of that—the Department of Labor doesn’t have a rule that says, “If you’re undocumented, you can’t be paid for your work.” They just say, “If you work, you have a right to be paid.” So they have these forms, and we use these forms, and then of course we went and interviewed the people, got the complaints, and then submitted them to the DOL, and then from there on, the process got started. And that was one of the very first complaints that I submitted to the DOL, and of course, all of the investigative background work had been done; they had all the tiers. They had all the names and phone numbers and addresses.

**VanZandt:** You made it so easy for them, “Here it is. What are you going to do about it?”

**Cintra:** And what was really fortunate about that particular case—it turned out to be a hundred and six workers—and what was really fortunate was that it did not fall under Davis-Bacon, but it fell under the Service Contract Act, which was not repealed. And what happened as a result is that the DOL kind of nudged KBR—Kellogg, Brown and Root—into doing a self-audit of all of the contracts that they had on that particular work order and therefore had to go back and make sure that all the workers got paid what they were rightfully supposed to get paid, which instead of seven was supposed to come out to, like, twelve-something per hour plus overtime. So we were able to recoup a lot of money, and in February we paid about a hundred and forty-one thousand dollars. And there’s still another hundred thousand outstanding on that same plane.

**VanZandt:** Um-hm, so hopefully—does the prognosis look good for getting that?

**Cintra:** Yeah. Yeah. But I mean, the DOL had to go up—they say they had to go up to the fourth tier or the third, which is right below KBR, and they finally paid.

**VanZandt:** Yeah, and you think about the time that elapses, and this is someone’s life, day by day, living in those conditions while we run through the red tape.

**Cintra:** So, but I mean, the people had to wait weeks, months to get paid. We’re living in 2006. And so after that it’s just been—I mean, it’s nonstop. And then we don’t have—OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] sits back now as a kind of an agency that just oversees it; they don’t really enforce anything at this
point. That was another thing that the Bush administration did. And all of these contractors are getting away with murder. I mean, nobody should have to die to make a living, and we’ve had several deaths here on the Coast.

**VanZandt:** Work-related injuries?

**Cintra:** Sure.

**VanZandt:** Or deaths.

**Cintra:** They were working on the barge; I think it was for the Grand Casino. I’m not sure. And I think two employees, one was a white, and the other one was a Latino, and the barge rolled over them, and they died in that murky water, drowned.

**VanZandt:** Good grief.

**Cintra:** More recently—that was back in February, I think, or March—more recently we had a young Latino male that was working in a tunnel, and there was no security, there was no safety or anything, and the tunnel caved in, and it killed him. He died a horrible death. Three males from Honduras were in New Orleans, and their contractor had put them up in an apartment building that had no electricity, that was a flooded apartment. And so he gave them a generator, and they had the generator running, and they all died in their sleep from the fumes. And I mean, I could name—the list goes on and on and on. And unfortunately, you talk to people, and most people are pretty receptive, but then you have the people that, it’s like, “Well, they’re illegal; they should get out of here anyway.” It’s like, what happened to humanity in between all of this? We’re talking about human beings here.

**VanZandt:** Um-hm. That seems to be one of the big problems to me is that making that connection that these people are human and on an equal level just like you or I, and just because we’re lucky enough to have been born here and be at a certain level and have the language skills and everything that they’re so far behind in, that they shouldn’t be treated the same.

**Cintra:** That they’re less than us.

**VanZandt:** And shouldn’t have the same rights and very, very basic rights, like you say, food and shelter, which still is a problem at this point, eight months after.

**Cintra:** One of the issues that we’ve had; we’ve had several issues. I mean, this is a Pandora’s box for real. This is just horrible. Early on, FEMA, of course, FEMA is the new four-, bad-letter word.

**VanZandt:** The new four-letter word. Right.
Cintra: They handed out thousands of flyers that said—and I’m looking for them, and I’ll get it for you before you leave—that said that if you were not eligible, in other words, this is going to the undocumented immigrant. If you—or the temporary visas, like for instance, temporary protective status didn’t qualify; people that had tourist visas wouldn’t qualify; people that were on H-2B work visas or guest work program would not qualify for assistance or people that were H-1As or people that were J-1s or any of those visas would not, did not qualify because they were considered temporary visas. But if you had a child born in the United States, then they could use that child’s information and file under that child’s name and social security number because that child is a citizen, and the flyer actually said, “And no information will be asked about you.” So people rushed to apply because, I mean, Katrina didn’t say, “Well, I’m only going to hit this side of town because it’s all white people that are citizens, and they’re going to be able to get assistance from FEMA, and I’m not going to hit this side of town because they’re all temporary or not-documented immigrants, and they’re not going to be able to get assistance, so I’m not going to tear away their house.” It didn’t say that.

VanZandt: Katrina didn’t discriminate like these contractors do.

Cintra: Exactly. It just went and hit everybody. Well, that was great, but they failed to tell people that on page nineteen of the FEMA disaster application guide, “All information that you put on this, by signing this application for FEMA disaster assistance, you agree that the information is subject to be shared by the Department of Homeland Security and not limited to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.” Well, isn’t that, like, a double standard? The last I heard.

VanZandt: Absolutely.

Cintra: Right?

VanZandt: Yeah.

Cintra: Five people were arrested.

VanZandt: Right, and to hide that on page nineteen—

Cintra: And deported.

VanZandt: —when they know that that’s not going to be—

Cintra: And they were deported. So people, at best, they couldn’t get assistance. And the really strange thing—not strange because it really doesn’t—it’s not strange for anything that we do here anymore. The guidelines for—let’s see [reading from brochure], “Internally displaced guiding principles.” This is—

VanZandt: A nice, slick brochure.
Cintra: The United Nations, we’re part of the United Nations. You know. It says that people—OK. “These principles shall be observed by all authorities, groups, and persons, irrespective of their legal status.” And it says that people have a right to essential food and potable water, to basic shelter and housing, appropriate clothing, and essential medical services and sanitation. Immigrants that did not have legal status in the United States did not—

VanZandt: Did not have the luxury—

Cintra: —have the luxury of getting potable water, food, clothing, and shelter. The Red Cross evicted over a hundred people out of their shelters because they were Latinos. You didn’t know about that?

VanZandt: No, I didn’t know about that.

Cintra: I had two shelters down here that the Red Cross evicted over a hundred people between both shelters, saying that they were workers from out of state, but they didn’t evict African-American, white, or anybody else that was working; they just evicted the Latino workers.

VanZandt: Because, you said, they were workers from out of state. So supposedly they were only taking workers who lived in the state regardless of—

Cintra: No, supposedly their logic behind that was that if they came from out of state to work, then their contractor should have given them housing. And you’re right; I don’t expect the Red Cross to house workers from out of state, but I do expect the Red Cross to be responsible in determining that these people were not workers. These people were victims of Hurricane Katrina, 90 percent of them. I knew them. We had a ministry, my husband and I. I knew these people.

VanZandt: Not only workers, but human beings. This is an emergency situation.

Cintra: Exactly, more than workers, they were hu[man]. That’s right. So I mean, all of these things went on down here, and I had to go and get certified by the Red Cross in order to do intake forms because Latinos and Vietnamese people weren’t getting their emergency cash assistance because Red Cross didn’t have anybody that spoke the language. It’s like a World War III down here.

VanZandt: It is, and that’s one reason I started working down there early, and I saw the fear. I worked a lot with the Vietnamese and saw the fear in their faces to even go fill out the forms.

Cintra: Exactly.
VanZandt: When you think about the confusion that can happen so easily, and the houses that were bulldozed; they hadn’t signed the right-of-entry forms. It’s huge, and a—and I talked to a FEMA director who said, “We have translators here.” But you know, I never saw any around there, and not only that, but it wasn’t—it’s sort of a trust issue, too, with them, and just when you’ve got that basic fear that you’re not sure what’s going to happen if you sign this form because you’re not really completely sure about what it is, you’re kind of paralyzed to take that action.

Cintra: Well, not only that, but I mean, they were signing forms in English, and they weren’t being told what they were, just all kinds of—

VanZandt: I mean, the fact that they didn’t even have evacuation orders in Vietnamese and Spanish.

Cintra: That’s another thing. I called WLOX since Friday, begging them to let me go on television to announce it in Spanish, begging them. They said, “Oh, we got somebody to cover that. We’ve already got somebody to cover that.” Not once did I see anything, and then I found out that they had somebody give a one-time announcement around four o’clock Sunday afternoon in Spanish. That was it.

VanZandt: And felt like they’d done their duty.

Cintra: Yeah.

VanZandt: It was an inconvenience.

Cintra: Nothing in Vietnamese.

VanZandt: Right. And that’s where religion, I’ve seen really, and these other groups, like you, who’ve come in and filled in those gaps because if it wasn’t for the church, for example, or the Buddhist temple in the Vietnamese community, they would not have had the information that they did from the beginning.

Cintra: Absolutely. Same with the Latino community. It was networking. Because my husband and I have lived on the Coast for years before Katrina, because we had a ministry in our church and in another church in Pass Christian before coming to the one we’re at now, which is Pass Road Baptist Church, because we’ve always been involved with the community, civil activists, you know, human rights activists—

VanZandt: You’re just naturally oriented that way.

Cintra: —and helping people, people had my number. And that was the way we got the word out to the Latino community, by phone. It shouldn’t have to be that way.

VanZandt: Yeah. And phones, you know. Were phones working then? No, I mean (laughter) not, particularly, afterwards.
Cintra: Well, this was, like, before the storm, people were calling me. “What do I do? I hear this. They say it’s a terrible storm. Is it really?” And I mean, I sat there and told people, “Yes, it is. You need to make plans to leave.” And I was able to reach a lot of them, but I wasn’t able to reach them all.

VanZandt: Um-hm. And that leads into another question about that evacuation because of that, and because so many of the immigrant population doesn’t have the means to get out.

Cintra: That’s another issue.

VanZandt: So tell me about that, since you were here, dealing with your own issues of losing your house and making those decisions, but working for everybody else at the same time.

Cintra: One particular case. The Grand Casino in Gulfport, like many other casinos on the Coast, they used to guest-work a program for their hospitality of their casino employees. They had a lot of H-2B workers, which is nonskilled laborers. The day before the storm, which was Sunday the twenty-eighth, they made their employees work. Nice people. At around three or four o’clock in the afternoon, which is when that first shift was over—I know this particular case—over sixty Jamaican women were put on their Grand Casino buses and transported to their apartment that was right on the beach and left there with no English skills, or very little, no transportation, no money.

VanZandt: You wonder if they even knew what was going on.

Cintra: We don’t even know what happened to them. We’re investigating that. That is outright cruel!

VanZandt: It is; it’s cruel. Yeah.

Cintra: And it’s like nobody cares about it. Haley Barbour was asked a question. Now, be mindful that since I’ve been on the ground, I have made the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, MPR [Mississippi Public Radio] radio, WLOX news, the Sun-Herald, Times Picayune, Clarion Ledger. I have a magazine in Mexico, the Rolling Stone magazine, CNN in Spanish, Telemundo, Univision. It’s been all over. The abuse and exploitation of the immigrant workforce is all over. Haley Barbour was asked at a congressional conference or hearing a month or two ago, together with the governor from Louisiana—


Cintra: Blanco, by a senator out of Hawaii, they were asked the question, “What do you think about the exploitation”—and I’m paraphrasing—“of the immigrant
workforce in Mississippi as well as in Louisiana?” Blanco at least had the decency, I guess, to say, “Well, I don’t really know about that, but I’ll check into it.” Haley Barbour, on the other hand, was like, “Exploitation in Mississippi? I would have known by now, surely. We have an attorney general, and we haven’t gotten any complaints.”

VanZandt: And this was recently, eight months after, and this has been going on for that long.

Cintra: So they want to turn a blind eye to what’s going on.

VanZandt: Yeah. It must feel like—

Cintra: What can I say?

VanZandt: —you’re hitting your head up against a brick wall a lot of times.

Cintra: I have to shame people into doing what they’re supposed to do. I have to do shaming campaigns against the Beau Rivage, against the Imperial Palace, against construction companies big and small, to force them or shame them into paying people the wages that they’re rightfully due because they did the work, and not only that, but to also give up workers comp[ensation] information because workers get injured on the job, and they dump them like raw pieces of meat that rotted.

VanZandt: Yeah. And shaming is, frankly, a good tactic. It’s been used for a long time in human rights. (laughter) And it’s a shame to say, but you have to shame, that and some good media coverage. But like you say, we’re so numb to things like this. We just see it over and over, and we just don’t seem to be able to make that connection that it affects us. “If it doesn’t affect my daily life, then I’ve just got to go about doing what I’m going to do.” And people don’t take the interest, much less take action to do anything about it.

Cintra: The comment that I hear all the time is, “But do they even have any rights? They’re illegal aliens.” First of all, aliens; they’re not from Mars. (laughter)

VanZandt: Yeah. Don’t you love that term? Right. (laughter)

Cintra: But they’re undocumented immigrants. And you know what? Beyond that, they’re human beings. If they were so concerned about their legal status, they shouldn’t have hired them in the first place. Homeland Security should not have said at the onset of the hurricane, after the hurricane hit that they were going to suspend, for forty-five days, the employers having to fill out an I-9, which is verification of employment eligibility for immigration purposes. Why did they do that?
VanZandt: Well, that was one of my big questions, too, is how Homeland Security enters into all this. It’s a whole different story since 9/11 [September 11, 2001]; it’s just a whole other layer of ineptitude—

Cintra: Yeah, it’s a joke, really.

VanZandt: —hoops to jump.

Cintra: They say, “Oh, we need to control our borders because of terrorists.” I have yet to see a Mexican or Honduran or anybody else that come from one of the Latin American countries that are terrorists, first of all. I have yet to see a terrorist walk through a Mexican border illegally or cross a river. They all have very real, very valid U.S. visas, and they have very real and very valid bank accounts that have a lot of money in them, and they’re very educated, including into schools of the United States. (laughter)

VanZandt: And paying taxes many, many, many, many, many of them.

Cintra: Yeah. They’re very elite people; they’re not your run-of-the-mill immigrant.

VanZandt: Yeah. And it’s such an image problem, isn’t it? The terminology, for example, “alien,” using that term, and even “refugee” status versus “internally displaced” person.

Cintra: Exactly, exactly. We’re not refugees. How could you be a refugee in your own land?

VanZandt: Which has legal ramifications, doesn’t it?

Cintra: Exactly.

VanZandt: And international law ramifications.

Cintra: Yeah. I had to testify in front of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington DC, and they’re very interested in the kinds of discriminatory practices that were displayed by American Red Cross and FEMA and so on and so forth.

VanZandt: Were they? So you really felt heard and like they were sincere?

Cintra: Oh, yeah. They’re planning on doing a tour of the Coast.

VanZandt: Have they yet?

Cintra: No. They haven’t yet, but they’re planning on it, and I mean, I have been asked for information, specific information, and it’s hard to give them specific,
detailed information because people are afraid to come forth because they don’t want to be deported.

**VanZandt:** It’s a catch-22, isn’t it?

**Cintra:** Yeah. It is a catch-22.

**VanZandt:** Yeah. Um-hm.

**Cintra:** I mean, I had people here that had a tourist visa at the time the storm hit, and they had to stay. They lost everything, including, a lot of them lost their passports.

**VanZandt:** Sure.

**Cintra:** People that were working under H-2B visa, for instance, they were under the Grand Casino; they were working for the Grand Casino, and they still had two, three months to go on their visa. Well, all of a sudden they’ve lost all of that, so they lost their employment, so their visa is nulled. How are they going to get back?

**VanZandt:** It’s crazy. It doesn’t make any sense.

**Cintra:** Catch-22; FEMA won’t help them. I’ve got people still living in tents and in cars, and then to add insult to injury, let’s bring in the workforce and promise them all kinds of things, and then dump them on the street, because, really there is no place for people to stay in Mississippi, in South Mississippi.

**VanZandt:** No.

**Cintra:** For them to promise them housing, it’s a joke, at best.

**VanZandt:** Well, and tell me about living conditions and housing rights. I’m curious about evictions and apartment costs skyrocketing, and the Fair Housing Act. Can you talk a little about that?

**Cintra:** Yeah. The first few days after the hurricane hit, ironically enough, most of the houses that were obliterated were on the beach, which was very high, affluent, white neighborhoods. Well, those people needed a place to live. North of the railroad tracks, or just a little further north, you have the middle-class, working-class neighborhoods. And for instance in East Biloxi on Judge Sekul, all of those apartments, Apple Abcott(?), all of those on Irish Hill, most of them were populated, probably 90 percent was Latino people that lived in there. Well, the apartment managers wanted their rent, like, the next day after the hurricane. Well, these people had just lost their jobs; they had just been through the worst storm ever to hit the United States.

**VanZandt:** Traumatized.
**Cintra:** Traumatized to say the least. They haven’t gotten paid because the places they were working for have been obliterated, so they don’t have any money. So they were forced to pay rent or get out. So they were evicting, illegally evicting, all of these people so that they could rent those apartments to the ones that had just lost their houses down on the Coast. And while they were renting originally for maybe four hundred dollars, now they could rent them for fifteen hundred dollars. And they would gladly pay for them because there was nowhere else to live. Well, that got stopped, but it still continued. And then to add, again, insult to injury, we also have some of the police forces, for instance, I was talking to the chief of police in Biloxi, who because we had reports that people in the Apple Apartments, the manager would call the police, and they would be arrested. And I called the chief, and I said, “Isn’t that, like, illegal evictions?” And his way out was, “Oh, no ma’am, we can’t do that.” I said, “You’re right; you can’t.” And he says, “No, but what we do is the manager calls us and tells us that they’re trespassing.” I said, “How could you be trespassing in your own apartment?” “Oh, well, ma’am, if she calls us and tells us they’re trespassing, then we arrest them for trespassing.” So now we have the police—

**VanZandt:** The police department should be more educated than that.

**Cintra:** They are.

**VanZandt:** Know how to handle it.

**Cintra:** You know they are. Well, then you have to call the Mississippi Legal Services, and you have to go talk to the City attorney, and educate them on what they can and cannot do, according to landlord-tenant rules, which really are very prolandlord in Mississippi, as you know, to begin with. So I mean, evictions have—I had an eviction early on of a landlady that was selling (brief interruption)—she was selling a trailer with what is? Lease to own?

**VanZandt:** Lease to own, sure.

**Cintra:** And when the hurricane hit, her daughter lost her home. Her other daughter lost her home, and now she had all her daughters and grandkids in her home, and she felt that she could just take this poor Mexican guy who was buying, had been buying this property from her for three years and just evict him by calling the police and the marshals who were friends of her, and having them come and threaten him with calling immigration. Well, he called me, and I got involved in the case, and we got an attorney, took her to court, and she lost. She couldn’t evict him. So she gets angry at me and filed charges against me for harassing phone calls; so now I got to deal with that. It’s like—

**VanZandt:** Just endless layers of back and forth.

**Cintra:** Yes.
VanZandt: Tell me, Vickie, what you’re doing, and I’m assuming this is one of your roles is educating the immigrant population, and I see lots of great brochures out in your lobby. That’s just such a crucial beginning point is to help them know what their rights are.

Cintra: Correct.

VanZandt: Even though they still may not have the capacity because of language skills or just the fear, like you said, that’s so ingrained to act on their own behalf. But what do you do? Do y’all offer or help them find language classes, or is there any kind of education process?

Cintra: At this point, what we’ve been doing is we were doing community meetings. We were holding community meetings and doing a point of interest at every meeting. Like for instance, we had an immigration lawyer come in; we had the banks come in. We had the Mexican consulate come into the office, and they were able to document many, many, about four hundred people. We did a tax clinic so that people could do their taxes because even though you’re undocumented, you can still do your taxes. And people want to be right; it’s the contractors who don’t want to take out taxes because they don’t want to have to pay their end of it. They do the tax evasion, evading.

VanZandt: Absolutely.

Cintra: The workers don’t. The workers are happy to have deductions and are happy to pay taxes, so we teach them that.

VanZandt: A typical white-collar crime.

Cintra: We teach them on the road to being a citizen of the United States. This is what you have to do; this is what you need to do. This is how you do it.

VanZandt: Navigating that system.

Cintra: Right. Then we have these community meetings, and we teach them about all the different aspects and their rights, and what they have a right to do and not to do, what they should do if they get stopped by the police, how they should react, how they should not react, what they have a right to say or not to say, things like that.

VanZandt: Kind of role playing.

Cintra: Exactly. And we’re also getting into doing house meetings, so we can kind of bring MIRA out of an office and bring it into the community so that it’s a community thing and not an office thing.
VanZandt: How many people do you have working with you? Do you have volunteers, I assume?

Cintra: Yeah. We have over fifty volunteers that are working with us between Pascagoula, Biloxi, and Gulfport.

VanZandt: OK. Did they work with MIRA pre-Katrina, or are these people who’ve come on board to help after?

Cintra: This is post-Katrina.

VanZandt: And were you based in Jackson before, or have you been on the Coast a while with MIRA?

Cintra: I’ve been on the Coast for about six years, but I only came on board with MIRA since the hurricane.

VanZandt: Oh, OK. And what were you doing before then? You mentioned your ministry. Can you tell me about that?

Cintra: Yeah. We had a ministry at Pass Road Baptist Church, and it’s called HIS and stands for Hispanic Interests and Services, and it’s HIS because it’s His. And basically we did a lot of immigration forms for people, basic stuff, like reapplying for a work permit or a temporary protective status, reapplying for that, or applying for lost cards or things that we could do without being real legal, and help people with that and then applying for social security cards and licenses and all this stuff that people had to deal with, the bureaucracy of the government and all of that. And then we would, of course, minister the Word and help them find housing and help them with medical and help them with schools and registering their children and tickets and the court and getting tags, and just all that. I mean, we were really involved with the community.

VanZandt: And I assume, of course, so many who aren’t Baptist and aren’t that denomination, it’s an outreach to anyone in the community.

Cintra: Right, right. But I mean, we helped anybody.

VanZandt: To anyone in the community, right.

Cintra: Yeah, we outreached to anybody because even the word of God says that if somebody comes to you and says, “I’m hungry, and I don’t have a place to sleep, and I’m cold,” and you say, “God bless you,” and you send them on their way, you’ve really not done anything. So you need to meet the physical needs of the person before you can even attempt to meet their spiritual needs, and that’s what Jesus did, and that’s just what we do, from that aspect. And so we were able to really touch a lot of lives. And then I was also an interpreter in the federal court; for that I got paid. The federal
court is the only court that mandates having an interpreter in court, during—oh, yeah. All the other courts don’t.

**VanZandt:** Really?

**Cintra:** Yeah. There’s no due process (laughter) here. City court, county court—

**VanZandt:** That seems like another basic that—

**Cintra:** —judicial court or circuit court, they don’t have interpreters. They don’t have to have interpreters. Sometimes they do; sometimes they don’t. I’ve had cases where somebody’ll come up to me and say, “Can you help me go to court on a ticket?” And I’ll say, “Sure.” And I’ll show up at the Biloxi court. They were in the county jail, and I’ll get there earlier so I can have them pulled from the docket. Because I do so much, they usually consider me, and they let me go really quick, instead of waiting to all the whole last name deal. If somebody’s name starts with a t, then I have to wait till it gets to the t before—but they pull it, and the judge knows me, Judge Henry(?) there knows me, and they pull me through fast so that I can go and do other things. And I got there this one case, and I asked her to pull him. And she was like, “He’s not on the docket.” And just about that time he shows up, and I ask him for his tickets, and he hands me a paper, which is really the disposition. He had already been through court, in front of a judge, and had gotten a fine and didn’t know it. The court was actually held in the county jail.

**VanZandt:** What a great example.

**Cintra:** With Judge Smith, and they had used, I think, an inmate that spoke a few English words as a translator.

**VanZandt:** That’s sad, very, very sad.

**Cintra:** So yeah, those are the things that we fight against here because really, they’re not getting due process.

**VanZandt:** Can we ask our friend here a few more questions? I know he’s terribly bored listening to us, and maybe he’s trying to pick up some words, and it’s helping him a little bit with his English, but he was in a jail in New Orleans, when he was picked up. And would he feel comfortable talking about his experience there? I don’t want him to talk about something he doesn’t want to.

**Cintra:** You want me to ask him about that? [Editor’s note: Ms. Cintra proceeds to translate his answers back to Ms. VanZandt in first person.]

**VanZandt:** If he (inaudible).

**Cintra:** (speaking Spanish)
**Youth:** (speaking Spanish)

**Cintra:** [speaking for youth] Worried about my family. (speaking Spanish)

**Youth:** (speaking Spanish)

**Cintra:** I was humiliated by the—(speaking Spanish)

**Youth:** (speaking Spanish)

**Cintra:** Because I didn’t speak any English so people would laugh at me.

**Youth:** (speaking Spanish)

**Cintra:** They would all laugh at me. (speaking Spanish)

**Youth:** (speaking Spanish)

**Cintra:** You know, they tried to beat me up. (speaking Spanish)

**Youth:** (speaking Spanish)

**Cintra:** They actually beat me up.

**Youth:** (speaking Spanish)

**Cintra:** And then I had a friend in the jail, a guy that became my friend, and his name was Ulysses, and he defended me and helped me. (speaking Spanish)

**Youth:** Si.

**Cintra:** That was in an adult prison. (speaking Spanish)

**Youth:** (speaking Spanish)

**Cintra:** I’m sixteen years old, but he was in an adult detention center. (speaking Spanish)

**Youth:** No.

**Cintra:** They didn’t want to believe me that I was sixteen. (speaking Spanish)

**Youth:** Si.

**Cintra:** The guards didn’t believe me that I was sixteen.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Ulysses told them that he was only sixteen, that he shouldn’t be there, and they didn’t believe him. They just threw him in there.

VanZandt: And you were in a cell with some other people?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: Yes.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: They changed me three times; they moved me three times.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: I went to a state prison first.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And then they brought me back to New Orleans.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And then when they brought me back, that’s when they really mistreated me.

VanZandt: In New Orleans.

Cintra: In New Orleans.

VanZandt: And where is his family?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: I have a brother in California.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: My mom and dad are in Mexico.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And my sisters.

VanZandt: In Mexico.

Cintra: In Mexico.

VanZandt: And when is the last time he spoke with his parents?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: About twenty days.

VanZandt: And what is it that he would like to do here in America?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: What are his dreams?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: OK. His dream is to learn English and go to school and learn Sheetrock and painting.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And to help my family and support them because—(speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: We’re very poor. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: My parents were corn farmers in Mexico.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: I used to suffer a lot while I was there because I would go to school, but we wouldn’t have anything to eat. So I decided to have to come here and work.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And I left my school because I wanted my sisters to have a better shot than me.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Because I didn’t have support, and so I want to help my sisters.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And I failed, but I’m still here.

VanZandt: Tell him he hasn’t failed, and he has a huge heart.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: And he’s one of the most noble human beings I’ve ever known.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: And his life will change for the better.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: And Vickie’s going to help.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: And he wants to learn Sheetrocking and painting and go to school?
Cintra: Learn English.

VanZandt: And he would be in high school, maybe, hopefully?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si. (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: Has he made any friends that he likes here, his age?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: No.

VanZandt: Not yet. OK.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: But when I was good, before I hurt myself, I was working hard. I’m a hard worker. And every eight days, I would send my mother money.

VanZandt: And your arm will get stronger again soon.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: He says, “I want to work and help my family.”

VanZandt: And how old are your sisters?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: One is twelve.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: One is thirteen.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: And the other one is eight.

VanZandt: Eight. And do you ever speak English with them, when he talks on the phone?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si. (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Sometimes.

VanZandt: He likes to be the teacher, too, and help?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si. (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: They’re my little sisters.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: We really got along well together when I was at home, and I really care for them.

VanZandt: Are they in school, now?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: Yes.

VanZandt: Do they work on the farm, also?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: Yes.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Sometimes they’re—

Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: —cutting tomatoes and chilies and things like that.

VanZandt: Is this a small family—

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: He says, “God willing, I also want to build them a house.”
(speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: No. (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish) Right now they live in a makeshift hut, and they have an outhouse. So he wants to build them a house, a real house.

VanZandt: Can he tell me what that house would look like?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Good material. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Oh, I want four bedrooms. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Inside bathroom. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Oh, and I want to dig a well for my mom, so she doesn’t have to carry water from the river.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: Because when I was there, I used to carry the water, but now she doesn’t have anybody to carry it for her, so she has to do it.

VanZandt: How far does she carry the water?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: About half a kilometer.

VanZandt: And would you share a room with your sisters in your new house?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: I would share with them. (laughter)

VanZandt: Oh, how nice. (laughter) And what does your brother do in California?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: I don’t know because my mom said he doesn’t call anymore.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Sometimes he calls (inaudible).

VanZandt: Did they come to the States at the same time?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: My brother came about a month before I did.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)
Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  He’s the one that helped me cross over, but he stayed in California.

VanZandt:  And how did you get to America?

Cintra:  (speaking Spanish)

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  My mom didn’t want me to come.

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  And I told her; I said, “If you don’t let me go, then I’m going to quit school because I can’t watch you suffer the way that you suffer.”

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  “I don’t want to see you suffer in that way anymore.”  (speaking Spanish)

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  My mom would cry a lot and didn’t want me to leave.

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  Because I would get home from school on Friday, and then I would go to work for two days, and my mom would cry a lot.

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  I would cut the fields and all that.

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  For people.

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  And the money that I made, I just, you know—

Youth:  (speaking Spanish)

Cintra:  —split it between my sisters, and I would buy things for my mom with it.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: I met up with the guy who used to cross people over, and I asked him to bring me. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And he charged me a thousand, five hundred dollars to come here. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: My brother paid it. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: He crossed over the desert. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: I was walking about eight days in the desert. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: No.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: I saw a lot of snakes.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: (speaking Spanish)
Youth: Yeah.
Cintra: And scorpions.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: I saw skulls of dead people.
VanZandt: You’re very brave.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: And when I got here, I just started to work really hard.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: And then he came to Atlanta, Georgia.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: And then they sent him to New Orleans.
Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: And then from New Orleans, he came to Mississippi.
VanZandt: Who sent him from Georgia?
Cintra: (speaking Spanish)
Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: (speaking Spanish)
Youth: Si.
Cintra: The same company—(speaking Spanish)
Youth: Si.
Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: He came directly to Atlanta because they told him that there was a lot of work there. So Enstar hired him, and they sent him to New Orleans, and then Enstar sent him from New Orleans to Mississippi.

VanZandt: And that’s when you learned Sheetrocking?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Taping, floating, (inaudible).

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And roofing, he learned roofing.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And demolition.

VanZandt: Good skills to build your own house. You’re learning all the skills.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: And when did he leave his brother?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: He just helped me cross over by paying the guy who crossed me over, but I didn’t get to see him. I just came directly to Atlanta.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: They told me that there was a lot of work in Atlanta, so that’s why I came.

VanZandt: And how was he treated on the way, once he arrived here?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: The coyotes just mistreated us a lot. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Yell at you and curse at you. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: No, they just curse at you really bad.

VanZandt: There are a lot of people here who want to help him, who do care.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: Does he practice a religion? Is he Catholic?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: All I do is sometimes I read the Bible. (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Christian.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Because all I’ve done is just go to work and work hard to support my family.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)
Cintra: And we would come back from school on Friday afternoon; he would go to work and work all Friday night and then work Saturday and Sunday and then go back to school on Monday. No time for anything else.

VanZandt: No time to go to church. But the church can be in your heart.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: What does he like to do, if he had time to play? At home, what would he do? Did he like sports, or to draw house plans? Or what does he like to do?

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: In school, I used to play basketball.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: And soccer.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si. (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: My grandparents and my uncles, they didn’t want me or love me because we were the poorest of the family. So they always rejected us.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: When I would get home from school, I would sell my grandmother’s chilies and tomatoes to—

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: But I had other cousins, and I was the only one that she would make work.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: That’s why I didn’t want to go back to school over there, but I like school. He’s always told us that.

VanZandt: What subject does he like the best?
Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: Math, he loves math.

VanZandt: Oh, wow. I’m impressed. You need to know math to build a house.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: Measuring and—

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

Youth: Si.

Cintra: I asked him if he’d like to be an engineer, and he said yeah.

Youth: (speaking Spanish)

Cintra: But now I’m just going to dedicate myself to just work, work, hard.

VanZandt: And what are his chances, Vickie, as far as going to school and finishing his education?

Cintra: Well, he’d have to have somebody to support him. And I don’t know.

VanZandt: Is there anyone doing anything like that as far as sheltering?

Cintra: I’m wondering how we can adopt him. (laughter)

VanZandt: Me, too.

Cintra: That’s what I’m sitting there, thinking, “How can I adopt him?” (laughter) I’m serious.

VanZandt: Well, I’m serious, too, and that’s why I asked. I’m thinking—

Cintra: All the people I would love to adopt.

VanZandt: —all the families here who would love to do that or at least have enough space to offer some shelter and a meal to someone who’s willing to work and help them, maybe, with whatever business they may have or their home while they can go to school during the day.
Cintra: Yeah. There are so many families. But I mean, I’m thinking of how I could do it. (laughter) You know.

VanZandt: Well, I know of some organizations that have sort of an adopt-a-child program where they don’t of course, legally adopt them, but—

Cintra: I wonder if there—well, they would have to legally adopt him in order for him to get legal status.

VanZandt: Right.

Cintra: And I wonder if his parents would allow that to happen.

VanZandt: But I guess I mean adopt, not in the legal sense, but to at least be willing to help them, to take them on—

Cintra: Sponsor.

VanZandt: —and sponsor, right.

Cintra: Well, I’m thinking of legally adopting. (laughter)

VanZandt: Yeah. That’s what really needs to happen, long-term. Right.

Cintra: It’d be something to look at, definitely. We’re going to really get into trying to find, to see if we can’t find him a better, more suitable place to live than where he’s living at, hopefully get him into school.

VanZandt: Have you been able to speak with his parents? Excuse me. Have you been able to speak with his parents at all?

Cintra: I’ve spoken with his mom, and she’s really grateful that we’ve taken him under our wing.

VanZandt: Oh, I can imagine.

Cintra: And his brother, she’s just deathly worried about him.

VanZandt: Well, I can imagine hearing someone’s voice like yours, on the other end, who can speak her language and help her understand that he’s under your wing, so to speak, and at least someone’s in his corner. That would make me feel a whole lot better, as a mother, to make contact with someone like that.

Cintra: So we’re going to see how we can—

VanZandt: Well, I wish him the best. And tell him thank you so much for sharing.
Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: And it will help people understand—

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: —hearing a real person [going through this] speak.

Cintra: I want to bring something up, and I don’t know how many people are really aware of this, but we, a lot of Americans sit on their self-righteous seat and judge and say, “They should come the legal way. They should wait their turn. They shouldn’t cross the border, and there’s so many of them.” And just all these things, and America really needs to get educated as to why these people are coming in so many large numbers, and especially people from Mexico. You know, NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] ten years ago was supposed to be something that would create thousands of jobs in Mexico, and help rebuild or build up their economy, and since NAFTA was instituted, there have been zero jobs that went to Mexico. They all went to China, which is a pet peeve of mine because the United States has had a blockade, or whatever you call that, a block on Cuba because of Cuba’s communism, but yet we have free trade agreement with China who is extremely communist. So that’s another issue.

VanZandt: Not to mention their human rights record.

Cintra: Yeah, exactly. So going back to NAFTA, all those jobs never made it to Mexico. The United States is pumping thousands and thousands of corn into Mexico at prices that the Mexican corn farmers—

VanZandt: Can’t compete.

Cintra: —cannot compete. So that displaces these people out of their own land by our government. They go to Mexico City; Mexico City is overpopulated and under—I mean, there’s no work.

VanZandt: Security, too, is just—

Cintra: It’s terrible. They go to the border to our machilodoros(?), which are companies, big-name, fancy, rich corporations that pay maybe three to five dollars a day, and there is no way for them to survive with that. So their only choice is to cross over and risk their lives. So for us to sit and judge why these people are coming here illegally, that is such a hypocritical thing for us to do. We really have to understand if we really want to consider ourselves to be human rights activists and advocates like we claim to be all over the world because we criticize all these other nations for violating human rights, but we’re doing it in our own borders with people that we are forcing to leave their country by what we’re doing. So we really have to understand
those issues before we can really say, “They’re coming here to take our jobs.” They’re coming here to do jobs that no one else wants to do, that often are low-paid, that are slave-type jobs, that are—personally, I’m a U.S. citizen, though I was born in Cuba. I’m an immigrant, first-generation immigrant. And I wouldn’t want to stand in a chicken plant, deboning chicken for fourteen hours a day at seven dollars an hour. I’m sorry. I’d rather clean houses. (laughter) I’m serious.


Cintra: So I just wanted to say that because that’s real important.

VanZandt: Yeah. I’m glad you did because NAFTA is something I wanted to bring up with you. And it remains to be seen what will happen with an election coming up.

Cintra: Now they want to do CAFTA, which is Central America Free Trade Agreement.

VanZandt: And what are your thoughts on the Mexican government? I know you said the consulate has been here. Do you have any communication, in a serious way, with them?

Cintra: I can’t really comment on—I really don’t have any serious communications with them. I can only comment on what I have seen. And what I have seen in the past pre- and post-Katrina, is nothing that I really want to write home to Mom about. Before Katrina I had a case of a gentleman who was fifty-five years old, who had had a two-thousand-pound form fall on his leg, crush one leg, and had the other foot halfway amputated, and he was living here in Mississippi, and the closest consulate, or the one that belonged to him was in Atlanta. I called them and asked them if he could do his passport through mail because he couldn’t travel; he had just had surgery, and he had lost his green card, so he needed to get a passport, a Mexican passport to stamp his status on it. And they told me that—the first question was, “Where are you from?” I said, “I’m from Cuba.” And they said, “Well, we need to help them because people from Mexico can help somebody from Mexico better than someone from another country.” And I was like, “Am I talking to—who am I talking to?” And then they wouldn’t allow me to do it by mail. We drove him in the church van nine hours to Atlanta to get his passport. We did it because it needed to be done.

VanZandt: To be done, yeah.

Cintra: And then the other thing was, another young man died while building the bridge on I-10 at Diamondhead, between Diamondhead and Bay St. Louis, fell forty-five feet from the bridge, down to a steel barge, was busted by the time he hit the ground, died, twenty-four years old, left his wife and two babies in Mexico. And we had gotten him an attorney that would at least fight for him and get him as much as possible. The Mexican consulate got involved; they hired all kinds of attorneys that they had, their own attorneys, investigators, here and there. And the last thing I knew,
the [wife] ended up with ten thousand dollars; the Mexican consulate ate the rest of it up. So I don’t really have much of anything good to say, from what I’ve seen. Now, maybe those are the rotten apples.

VanZandt: We’d like to think so, but—

Cintra: So (laughter) I don’t really have any use for the consulate. I think they’re more into moneymaking than they are into humanity. They got angry at me because there was an article that came out early on; I testified in front of the Black Caucus at Jackson, state capital, about the discriminatory practices of Red Cross and FEMA and MEMA.

VanZandt: I meant to be there, and I missed that.

Cintra: And I said something in there that in my travels, I travel—I don’t know, two, three thousand miles, I don’t know—going up and down Mississippi and the Coast and distributing flyers. Not once did I see any of the consulates represented by each of the countries that are here, and they got wind of that because it came out in a Mexican magazine, and they wrote Bill a letter saying. “Your Victoria Cintra is stating this. And I want you to know, we’ve been on the ground.” Yes. They were on the ground in Pascagoula. As a matter of fact, (inaudible) that works for us here, they had—apparently the Mexican people had gathered or collected or fund-raised millions of dollars to help the victims, the Mexican victims—

VanZandt: I heard about that.

Cintra: —of Katrina, and the Mexican consulate was in Pascagoula, handing out money, and she went to get it because she’s a Mexican national, and they told her, “Oh, no. You can’t get this money.” And she says, “Why not? I was born in Mexico.” “Well, because you’re a permanent resident of the United States, and FEMA will help you. This is only for those who don’t”—she goes, “Wait a minute. I’m a Mexican.” And they refused to give her assistance. So that’s—you (laughter) you asked me about the (laughter)—

VanZandt: Yeah. That’s a good picture right there, a snapshot of what’s going on, the level of concern. Well, Vickie, there’s so much more I could ask you, but I know we’re sitting here, and you’ve got things to deal with, and I’m looking up at the Oxfam [Oxford Committee for Famine Relief] sign and plan to talk with them.

Cintra: They’re the ones that gave us the initial grant to start post-Katrina work.

VanZandt: And how big of a grant was that?

Cintra: I think it was thirty-two thousand; that’s the only grant I know by heart because that was what they hired me for the first two months for.
VanZandt: OK. And when will that end?

Cintra: Oh, that ended. My contract was extended for a year, and we’ve gotten other grants as a result of all the work that we did. We’ve collected over seven hundred thousand dollars in unpaid wages; we’ve recuperated it from contractors.

VanZandt: That’s incredible; that’s an incredible number.

Cintra: Only a hundred and forty-one thousand of it was through the U.S. Department of Labor. I’ve stopped giving complaints to them because they take too long, plus when they collect, they’re only by law allowed to collect [$5.15] an hour, and some of these people were promised twelve and fifteen.

VanZandt: That’s not fair. You can’t even survive on [$5.15] an hour. And they’re not paying overtime; companies aren’t paying overtime down here. They’re misclassifying workers like crazy; they say they’re subcontractors, and they 10-99 them to death, just to have to not pay payroll taxes and FICA [Federal insurance Contributions Act] and workers’ compensation on them and all that. It’s just like a World War III.

VanZandt: It’s a nightmare. Well, I just can’t tell you; I mean, this is, it’s overwhelming, and to think about what you’re handling on a daily basis and what you’re going home to, and I’m sure that it’s hard to get out of your mind.

Cintra: Well, we were blessed. We have a FEMA mobile home.

VanZandt: Do you?

Cintra: Yeah, because my husband had back surgery, so they put us in an ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] mobile home.

VanZandt: Here in Biloxi?

Cintra: In Gulfport.

VanZandt: In Gulfport, OK. And what are your future plans as far as housing? How is that looking right now? Who knows?

Cintra: I don’t know.

VanZandt: Yeah. Got too much to think about right now.

Cintra: Yeah. I really leave things in God’s hands, truly leave them in his hands. We walk by faith, not by sight, and when you concern yourselves with everyone else’s
problems, then your problems really become extra small. Sometimes you forget about
them; so that’s what we’ve done.

VanZandt: That’s a great way to end this. It’s organizations like MIRA and Oxfam
and just countless other organizations, really, who are working so hard to make a
difference. And they are making a difference, and I know you see that. And you have
to feel good about what you’re doing, and I hope you think about that at the end of the
day.

Cintra: Yeah.

VanZandt: When, you know, after all the frustrations. And I just thank you for
participating in this. There is no telling how many people will hear this, and hopefully
that will make an impact as well. So thank you for participating.

Cintra: Is there any way you can get me a copy of the—

VanZandt: Absolutely, you will get a copy of this. When we finish it—

Cintra: That’d be great.

VanZandt: —you’ll have a bound copy of it, and that’s part of it, is just documenting
people’s stories, and then it’s something for you to have as a historical record of what
you’re going through, what your organization’s going through, and the impact they’re
making. So you sure will. [To youth], and thank you so much for participating.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

VanZandt: Good luck to you.

Cintra: (speaking Spanish)

(end of interview)