

Amarely Gutierrez Oliver

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Interviewee Amarely Gutierrez Oliver

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Abstract: Amarely Gutierrez Oliver was born in El Salvador in Central America. She moved to the United States when she was six years old. Her early childhood was filled experiences of prejudice and her mother and father struggled because of their lack of education and their ability to speak English. This shaped her identity to become an activist at a very young age. In college she started a movement to help minority students feel safe on campus in response to cases of harassment by campus police. Amarely finished college at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and earned her master's degree in Mental Health Counseling at St. Thomas University. She worked with children in the education field and is currently working for the YWCA. She is the director of Domestic Violence Services which provides many resources for women and children who have been harmed by domestic and sexual assault. She is inspired every day to work harder for a better community for her daughter to live in.

MN Yes, so we're interviewing Amarely all over. It is April 17 2017. So we're just going to start a little bit with your childhood; where you were born and raised.

AGO So I was born in Central America and I was there until I was almost six years old. My dad came [to the United States] first then he applied and my mother came over. So we were raised by my grandmother probably for two and a half years or so and then they brought us over to this country. So I grew up speaking Spanish and they came here and learned English. I came during snow season. I had never seen snow. It was interesting coming to this country. My parents, when they left to go get us, when we came back they had an apartment in a not so wonderful neighborhood and someone had drilled a hole in the door so they had stolen everything. They went to come get us. And the neighbors said it doesn't really mean anything. So that was like a very traumatic experience coming in finding them and my brother. I mean I don't know if people are going to want to go back. So we stayed in that apartment for a little while and we didn't live in a very wonderful neighborhood. There was definitely a lot of crime. We moved from that apartment to a different apartment within the same neighborhood

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predominantly from the Dominican Republic. So we're a little different and they definitely had their cliques. So it was interesting growing up there. My parents were very strict, very country. So I was not—and we weren't necessarily allowed to go out and play with the other kids for fear that they would influence us. And my parents, I guess that was one of their biggest fears so they invested in just buying us toys and they would take us to parks but only under their supervision and then we did get placed into daycare. So I did get to have fun outside of home and in daycare and school. And I think we were there for pretty much almost my entire childhood and where I was this was in Salem, Massachusetts. It was called The Point.

MNOK. So could you just for a little bit about your school and your community.

AGO So in growing up in El Salvador you go to school very early in that country and you go to school for free. Almost like they give scholarships or something. So I already knew how to read and write by the time I was five. And then when I came here because I didn't speak the language they put my brother in kindergarten and put me in first grade and it was like a repeat of what I was doing in our country. But my mom didn't know how to have a key to push for me to write. So the school we went to was one that allowed for those children that didn't speak English they could go to a special school so that they could. So I went to that school first.

AGO So when I was little used to call it or worse because they didn't know what it was for us. It's connected to saying see I was right next to you that's usually with the teachers. So I started there and then they changed the programming over to the school. So I continued school day. So obviously school here is free; you don't have to pay for it. So we went to school there and continued to learn English and continued the life learning to dominate the language and the theme of the third school I went to as a kid, my mom chose to send me to a Catholic school. She managed to get a scholarship so I ended up going to a Catholic school. She felt safer sending me there.

MN Do you think you can go until like high school years and then report to college.

AGO So I studied with teachers at this Catholic school and I was in the eighth grade. I despise that school wholeheartedly. They were completely racist. It was worse than going to public school. I think the kids didn't understand my culture at all. I got comments like, “Don't you wish your hair was like Jewish?” So it was not a good experience for me. So when the opportunity came for my mom allowed me the choice of Catholic school again for high school or public. So I ended up at Salem High and I loved it. I loved my high school. I did. I was very athletic. I started with softball and basketball. And then continued in high school with softball. Turned out that I'm

too short for basketball but that career was not going to center again. So I chose softball, track, and field hockey. Pretty much the three that I did throughout this school year and then at I did powderpuff. So I was very involved in high school. I did after school activities involved in student council things like that and anything related to sports. So I had a blast to have my friends. It was just an amazing experience and the teachers were there and they were great teachers. I'll always remember one over all of them. His name was Mr. Cowan. I was in his history class and I was not the best student. I was probably average and I was doing the bare minimum because I wanted to go to college. Bare minimum because my priority was sports. I'm like, "What do you need like a C +? I can get you that." So I made it through without really studying a lot which is not good.

AGO And I had one professor who in his class I didn't study for one test and he actually took the time and made me stay afterwards to talk to me and he asked me why and I said I couldn't. There was an emergency at my house something happened with my sister. I was responsible for her while the emergency was going on and I couldn't study like I had to watch my sister I had to take care of my family. So I had no time to study and I ended up with like a six to eight or something he's like next time you tell me I have time and I was to test and you can have time to study.

AGO So to me it was like he actually cared. So I studied and actually enjoyed history. I learned a lot from him. I ended up accepting the honors class and decided to stay within the same class on the honors side so I had to do a little bit extra work. And I learned so much from him and I did my best for him. Probably the only class I ever worked hard for and only because he cared. And then towards the end he offered a reference and he doesn't typically make references for colleges for the students. But he came up to me and said, "If you want a reference or you need one, it's yours."

AGO And I was just like, "OK I will take it." So he became my favorite teacher because he wasn't just like that with me he was like that with the kids that nobody saw, the kids that didn't have good backgrounds that came from one fighter. So he cared for them and he did special accommodations to try to get them to have the same opportunities with kids that have privilege. So for that I was really grateful and he was just unbelievable. So he understood a lot of things but he could connect with the entire class like I don't think there was one student there that did not. He was just amazing even with the kid that always gets in trouble. He'd step in. He was just an amazing teacher. But he went through that high school right up until I graduated. My guidance counselor was pretty cool. He asked me what I wanted to do in college. I said, "How far can I get away from Massachusetts." He said, "California." I said, "Let's go to California." But he said the other side of Massachusetts has in-state tuition. And I was like alright.

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AGO So I applied to the colleges in state and I got in all three, but I decided that what I would do is give a response first as well. And I ended up getting a letter from North Adams first. So I said, "OK I'll go there." And then there was a stipulation that I would have to do their summer enrichment program which meant I couldn't have the last summer with my friends, I'd have to go to school. I'd be in school July and August. And then a week and a half later Bridgewater said you can come with extra work. So I was mad. I was like I shouldn't waste my summer. So I ended up going to Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. They changed the name but I ended up going to college there. That was my high school [experience]. It was great. I loved the diversity. Everyone connected or not. They were great. And I loved my experience in Northampton. And Massachusetts is a state that is predominantly Caucasian. There are very few people of color there. So everything about it was great.

AGO My friends, the professors, what they were trying to do there was wonderful, just the city itself was unkind to people that were not white. So we did have to do a little bit of activism there where I had a few traumatic things happen to me and then a few things that happened to my friends. So I was in my car on college campus actually on my way to one of my friend's apartments and a cop pulled me over and I had no idea why, but then I was surrounded by five police cars and he was yelling at me. "What are you doing here? Show me proof that you belong here." And I was like, "I go to college here. Did you read the sign?" I had no idea what they wanted, but they wouldn't let me out of the car. They kept me in there for like a good half hour. And then they said you can go. And then they all left. So for me I was like I'm done, I'm done. And then my friend got it worse. He's Black and he was on his way to college. The campus in a different town and the police followed him through three different towns past their jurisdiction and pulled him over. A mile and a half outside of campus and they pulled him over told him to get out of the car to lay flat on the floor with his arms out and they held a gun to his head while they searched his car for drugs. He'd never experienced that and he's from Boston.

AGO So he had no idea why all of these things happened to him. He didn't know what was going on. So it really shook him up. And then when he got there he shared what was going on and most of us have been sharing what was going on to campus police and to administration but they weren't listening. So a few of the campus leaders that were in our groups decided to call all of us together that were having these incidents. They were seniors and at that time it was during my sophomore to my junior year and they said we're going to work, we're going to start things up, and we're going to do it in a manner that people would listen. You go where everyone gathers. They had asked all of our schools to dinner so it was like last class exactly at a certain time. We were to give one sheet of paper to the professor telling them why we were leaving and

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we were all to head down to the mess hall and we were supposed to line up in a straight line so that the students had to go between us. We were handing them a piece of paper that says if you wanted to know what this is about come to the auditorium at 6:30 p.m. So all the teachers were aware and some of them actually were supporting what we were doing. They guided some of them to do. So when that bell rang we left in the middle of class. And that's when we started talking, we started telling them why we gathered them all, and we wanted them to hear from us on what it was like for us to be on this campus. And we were asking them for support and we told them all of the things that people have been doing to us in the city. So some of the students were in shock and they were like, "That's happening to you?" while others were like, "This is what this is about? Whatever this is has nothing to do with me," and they would walk. I didn't care what some did. You know you get both sides. So at that time the media got wind of it and we have like the radio station calling up our group leaders. So no one responded to the media. We needed them to reach the president at this point. And that's what happened they reached the president. He was livid. He went after campus police as to why he wasn't made aware, why he wasn't told that all of these problems were happening. So then that's when he decided to get involved with the students and having conversations with the city as to why you're harassing people of color and things like that. So things didn't get worse but they didn't get better.

AGO But at least it didn't get worse. So most of us that spent the next two years there were just a little bit more careful. We were going to go out in that city and we made sure that we would always have our cards and things like that just in case we got pulled over. But it was probably one of the biggest things that impacted me during those college years. But the rest of it was pretty good. I think there were at least 17 of us or so that did it together between freshmen and seniors and do you continue to have protests or will you have these talks through involved. We continued to report. And we met with administration and we just continued to demonstrate this is what happened with this officer and then this time there was some follow up and there was more communication. So it did get better. It declined the number of times they stopped us. And anytime anyone said, "I go to that college," they literally would leave us alone because they didn't want any more problems. But then we started thinking that such people actually live in that city. But that was something that we didn't necessarily get involved.

MN I'm just going to come back a little bit too if you can talk about like your parents maybe about how also how they felt about all of these situations in college and high school things.

AGO So for my dad it was especially hard on him. He had a sister living here already so it made the transition easier. He does have a degree in accounting. But it's not valid in this country. So he got whatever you could get and at that point he was just like a cook in a restaurant which that's

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where he is now too. He has a very thick accent. And then when my mom came the same thing. My dad supported so that my mom was able to get an associate's degree in administrative assistant type of job. So she ended up working for her community college and she's still there to this day. She speaks better English than my dad does. Both of them experienced a lot of difficulties and experienced something in terms of barriers. But they kept going. They had children to support. I think the saddest story that was shared with me was what happened with my dad. He's a go getter and he didn't have a car. He would walk home when he got the apartment every day whether the weather was bad or not. It was a long walk. So even in the winter it didn't matter. So they were saving up to try to get a car so that he wouldn't have to always walk. And he did have some coworkers that were supportive of him. He had a very good friend and they got really close and he was helping them out. They're the ones that came to pick us up. And there was an incident with some coworkers. They were friends of coworkers or something and they saw my dad and they said, "Hey, you need a bike."

AGO So they took him and then he said he was sorry he got into the truck because they smelled like maybe had some alcohol or something. They didn't smell very good. So he got in the truck and he said, "You're going the wrong way." They brought him all the way back in the opposite direction and then they threw him out of the truck and then from there he had taken the slashes on his face and then they started laughing and said, "You should just go back to where he came from." "My dad wiped himself off and just kept on walking and went straight to work and he literally had to run some of it so that he could make it there on time. So he didn't make it. To me it is like the worst thing could have happened to him. And then my mom experienced in her own way—she still does to this day—where you know she was very good at what she did, but people would make comments and say, "Well, no one can understand what you're saying." She's like, "Okay, I'm speaking right now. We're talking." My dad is so smart. He does his own taxes. He could have gone back to school. But I think with everything that happened to him he almost feels like I'm not going to get into this school, I'm not going to get a job, they're not going to give it to me. So you kind of just, he kind of just gave up and stayed in the same job he's been in. So he's like a cook and everyone respects him and stuff like that, but he just never left it. And then my mom I think it played a part on her esteem in the sense that she could have done better positions. But after hearing so much of, "Well you're not this, you're not that," just settled with her and, "I'll retire from here." I mean she just didn't feel that she could get or deserve the position. So it was hard for them. And then having two kids and then figuring out how to support them with their minimum income was also very difficult for them. So it took them a little bit longer to take the house. So we weren't able to do a lot of good until I was like 14. I was in high school I think when my parents were first able to purchase there. So my sister got it better she was 400 years

later. So she grew up I think a little bit of a child. It was an event like the rest of it was all there. So it's very different.

MN Yes so going back to college. What did you study in college.

AGO I did psychology. I went in to do education and then I had two courses I couldn't do it. So I stayed with psychology and social work.

MN OK. But you said that you started basically doing and being involved in social issues in college. Right after college did you get involved—did you work or service work?

AGO So I had a lot of fun in college just like high school. So I was not going to get into grad school and I wanted to eventually get my doctorate. And actually the college I wanted to go to was Clark [University] but it was never going to happen right now [because of] my GPA. So I decided to come back towards Salem and work for a little bit and then decide kind of what I wanted to do. The problem I had was when I came back I had a hard time finding a job. I got responses about my last name which at that point before I got married was Gutierrez and then I had my first son, Riley. So both of them together set off alarms in people's heads or something. So a lot of the response I got was, "Oh I'm so sorry. You spoke English. How do you know English or how to give an interview?" So that was the usual response. So I had to kind of at that point get creative about what I've done as far as different jobs and I was always caring for kids so I actually became a nanny. That was my first job right out of college. An amazing family; love those kids. I still talk to them now. And I was a nanny for them for two or three years or so and started paying student loans and stuff and then I decided let me go attempt for a job again. Now I'm back kind of in the swing of things and I started working as a daycare provider. And so I did childcare for years. What I did while I was in high school so I worked the entire time as a daycare teacher. So I did that for a couple of years and then I decided I need a job that's more in line with what I got my degree in. So I had an opportunity through a friend of a friend. And they gave the interview for me to work at a residential facility for children who had mental health issues and I loved it. I absolutely fell in love with that. I worked with the kids that I wanted to work with. They all had disabilities. You know, some of them saw butterflies in the others. I had to learn how to restrain them how to de-escalate. It was just an amazing, amazing job. I mean at that time I was there for a few years. I told the director that I was going to get my master's and come back for his job. So I started planning.

AGO And at that time my mom's advice was, "You're back in Salem with the same friends that didn't go to college and they're not really going to do much of anything else with their life except

spend like \$300 on a Coach purse. Why? I don't know. So that's not really who we want any more so we might want to think about maybe you can't or shouldn't. Maybe you should think about moving and looking at other alternatives so that you can get your master's." So I started looking at other options. And I applied for positions again just a little easier to experience. And I looked at Arizona and I looked at Florida and different states and Florida actually responded. They were called Catholic Volunteers in Florida through Americorps. So if you sign up with them and you dedicate one year of your life to volunteer you get a little stipend and then you work for an organization that they like. I was 23 or 24 or something like. They accepted me. I drove myself and when I think about it I'm like, "You're crazy you let your daughter get into school with a Chihuahua and drive off." So we laugh about it now, but I drove there and I ended up driving three hours past the exit—just crazy.

AGO And I got stationed to work in the Fort Lauderdale/Miami area. So it was awesome. I ended up having a roomie who was from Alabama and then we made a couple of different friends in that area on the same side of the park. And you meet quarterly with the people that are in the program and they talk a lot about your fate and things like that, but also about what it is that you're doing in those positions. I did that actually did it for two years and ended up getting two stipends that I could put away towards going to my master's. So because of them I was able to get into my master's program. It was at St. Thomas University. It was a Catholic university because I was already working for a Catholic school I got 60 percent off or something like that. So it was awesome. I ended up getting my master's from there and it was a mental health counseling. It was an amazing program. So I did graduate with honors; smartened up and decided to take it seriously. So it was for me, it was good. I got to live a little bit on my own and Florida is just amazing. It's just wonderful.

LS Oh my God.

MN So after you getting your masters and everything, when did you start doing like social work and things like that. Or like anything that really triggered you to do.

AGO So I always did it. I did counseling for the school and I was also their teacher. And then through my internships I was working and doing an internship for my master's program. And then I was also one of the therapists for substance abuse and it was all youth related. So it was all youth related all the work that I did and it was always typically crisis. My strength is in stabilizing the situation especially in younger children. So I did that for a number of years and then it changed a little bit. Some of the kids I worked with unfortunately would meet their goals, but then they would go backwards and then we would talk about it in session. It was always

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domestic violence. That was the key for all this, I want to say with 90 percent of my clients. I decided I needed to be more informed about domestic violence. So I got a part-time job working for a shelter that focused on domestic violence. I think I did that like once a week and I fell in love with that. I saw how the dynamics played out. I saw how it impacted the children that were just witnessing it. I saw how survivors were so strong. Just keep going after being broken down. I really enjoyed it and I loved what I could bring to the table for them and how I can support them. So I did some of that and that's how I ended up shifting my career and life in an instant.

LS How long have you been working?

AGO Ten years.

MN So now that we have just like a sense of your background it's because this is the history project or just formalities. You are one of many children three. And currently what profession do you hold.

AGO I'm the Director of Domestic Violence Services. I am married. I have an amazing partner. He's very supportive of me.

MN Oh yeah. Can you talk more about what you do for the why did he say of being your director.

AGO So I'm one of the department chairs. My focus is specifically domestic violence. So whatever you see there is what I'm responsible for. I have three elders in all, three supervisors, and three team leaders that help me coordinate and support the staff. We do anything. All our services are free. You just have to identify as a survivor. We work with youth. We work with elderly we work with adults. It doesn't matter where a child is to violence. So if a parent said, My 7 year old is showing a lot of aggression. They witnessed my husband beat me up three years ago. Could you work with a child?" We have college students who will come and tell us, "The guy I'm dating, this is what he's doing. He's harassing me, he's doing my school work." The students go back to the college and get orders, whatever is needed. So you name it we will end up doing that. And then we have a 24-hour hotline that has to be answered and a chat line and then we do supergroup education consultations. We're also located in the police department. We look at the police report to see if there's any incidents of violence domestic violence. We have our office here.

MN So we participated in expanding some of our services and that's in collaboration with a whole lot of partners. And then we have different pathways for changes in Haiti. We have survivors on the committee, the police department is on the committee—that's fairly new. The focus is sexual exploitation at work. People know what is prostitution. We've been working really hard to be able to support that so that the person being exploited isn't looked at as a criminal but as a victim. Look the life support services that we actually hold the perpetrators. I mean first of all the person purchasing the sex rather than getting off. So for me it's been a process where I did the front line work for so long and I enjoyed it. So it was a very big change. So I've learned the hard way. Sometimes the easy way out of the very political. So there's a lot of things that happen in our communities that I don't agree with. But I also have to be careful how I approach it. Nobody likes anyone to be in their face telling them what to do, all this is wrong. So there's got to be like a very special way when you're approaching it so that you can come to a conclusion that is beneficial for both. And to me that's been a tool that I've been able to use very often and I'm very lucky to know how to use it. Not everyone can. Sometimes people's passion and anger comes out in them without realizing. It's also helped me develop my leadership skills where I can focus more on how to help develop my staff.

AGO So I'm very big on empowering when staff don't laugh and they get mad because I actually know things all the time. And I had one come and say, “Do you want me to work for you?” “Of course.” “And why are you sending me this?” “This is an awesome opportunity.” So I don't want to lose myself, but I also feel that they should have an opportunity to see what else is out there.

AGO So oftentimes some of them leave and some of them come back and say, “I don't want to work there, I'm good here.” I feel that this agency is very unique in its mission is and we get to be very verbal about it and it's okay to be verbal about it and in other companies you really can't have those conversations and they're not safe to have. We encourage it and we ask people to have those conversations. I've been able to be very innovative and creative in how they connect our mission to what we do and really getting the staff more involved to do that.

MN OK. And you said that there were some movements or things that you weren't taking part of. Can you tell us again the reasoning?

AGO So there are some things for example that I think for myself is too close to home so when it comes to race and things that are going on I will get involved with some and there are some that I need to take a step back because it's too close to home. And I do know some of the players and you know how it might turn out. They don't get involved because they think that's when my boundaries need to be pretty clear. We're not messing up what they're trying to do and where I

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think they need to do it, the way they have to do it for them. But I could easily say, “Don't do it. This is what will help,” but sometimes people have to go that way and learn any difficult lessons from that. I think for me what's going to be the most difficult has been sometimes staying silent when it's not my major disease. It has been really hard. I've been working very hard on that for like eight months. And it's difficult when you know you should be doing something you can't.

MN Anything you worry about the most or anything?

AGO What I worry about the most right now is the current state of our country. And how that's impacting a lot of people and how that's causing a huge divide in how some people who I consider live in a comfortable world you only see you're comfortable if you only see your point of view. So you don't see how everyone else is affected. And I can respect her not wanting to see that because it's your tunnel vision. Like I want to stay here. So I respect that. There's so many people being hurt and nobody's paying attention to them and they're trying to say, “Please help me, help me.” So although they're trying to do their best to be heard in a peaceful way it's not enough. We need more people to be verbal that are like yourselves or white allies. They can say, “Listen guys, I'm listening to what's going on.” So my worry is more that it's affecting so many people and then it's creating this huge divide where once before we have been working together, now it's a little bit harder to work. Experiences have shaped your ideals. I talked about just moving to this country and having the parents that I have. They never once gave up no matter what they were faced with. Their focus was t to give our kids the opportunity that we would never have in our country. So for me that stood out because I value what this country has. Even if I'm in debt. Student loans you can't go to college anywhere else and your money in this country allows you that opportunity even if it's a loan. It gives you that opportunity.

MN Could you talk about like anything that you're most proud of though.

AGO I'm most proud of what I am. I have a daughter. She's like 21 months. So she is my pride and joy. I love her to death. She is just amazing. And she is my daughter for sure. She is super independent and I just keep nodding my head thinking—but I'm extremely proud of her. She's so little and she takes everything in. And I look at her and her cousins and and they're kind of like just tuned into the cartoons where she's kind of looking at things a little differently. So I'm really proud of who she has become.

MN Do you think being a mother has shaped your optimism when you look at things like in regards to your work and your job.

AGO That's a really good question. I've always been an activist. I've always been an activist. I think the difference now is that now that I have a daughter I'm looking at it a little bit more seriously because I want her to have more opportunities than I ever had. So I'm working probably five times harder than I ever was. Just so that she can get that opportunity I didn't get as a woman because regardless of your color it's hard as women.

LS How does your husband feel about oh he's learning a lot especially about you know different races ethnicities and different points of views.

AGO And so for him, he is a white man, he's privileged. So he didn't quite understand what that meant until I explained it to him. So I gave him a quick story. We live in Princeton. And at that time 45 had been named president. And I was driving to work and this truck had pulled in front of me with this big fat flags and started threatening me saying, "You're next, you're next." So for me that was just like, "Are you kidding me?" Ain't kidding me. This is the first day the president is here and this is the stuff that I have to deal with. And then I had a conversation with [my husband] about it and I said I don't feel safe in this town. The town is predominantly Caucasian. Half of them have Confederate flags. And then I had to explain to him that I feel as a person of color, I have a right to live in a world community. That's what I want. I don't want to live in the city. It's density. It's not easy. I like nature and have a right to live in here and I don't see why I can't. So we have this huge conversation about it and he started like understanding what that privilege.

AGO I know how that connected and for us it's been a little different because he is white he isn't Latino. He's so sweet. So he's always learning and he's trying to be as understanding as he can. So you get to have these discussions with all of us. So he's like super supportive.

MN OK. Anything else that you would like to touch on.

AGO No. But you gave me a lot of questions.

MN Yeah. I covered we know all about you.

AGO Yeah. Because that's a lot. Thank you