

Interview with Sonta Thompson

Were you and your family born in the United States or did you migrate here from another country?

I was adopted from Guatemala

What was your family situation before migrating to the United States?

Guatemala was experiencing civil unrest at the time and a lot of the men, the indigenous men were being kidnapped and forced into the army, and it was a time when everybody was pointing fingers and people were named as going against the army and there wasn't any basis for it. It was just kind of if I didn't like it then I would send your name to them and they would come get you and my father was one of those victims that was named as not supporting the army and so he was kidnapped and without parents we were sent to an orphanage. At the orphanage, after going back to our grandparents for a time, and not having that worked out we were sent back to the orphanage and then eventually were put up for adoption.

So you weren't really prompted to come to the United States—you were adopted?

Yes

What was your trip to the United States like?

It was very surreal now that I think about it and at the time I'm sure I would have, I'm sure I should have been really traumatized, but for me in my situation without any parents it was kind of exciting and I knew that I would have another family and so it was something to look forward to. And I had heard a lot of stories about the North, and how kids were eaten if you didn't obey any rules and there were just horrible stories, and so I had that scare, but also the excitement of a new home and a new family

How does your family emphasize education? This would be your adopted family.

My father was really for self-education as well as taking advantage of whatever the public system provided for us and he really supported it at home and my mom was the one that did a lot of the instruction at home and before we actually got into school—helping us learn English

So they were very supportive?

Yeah, they really pushed it.

What were your feelings toward the education system in the HSD?

In the beginning it was a lot better than what I ever could have had in Guatemala. I did go for first and second grade in Guatemala and it was a tiny, little one-room school and it was a lot of different grades crammed into this room. I don't remember the specific instruction, but I just remember it being really strict and really difficult.

So when you were adopted and you came to the United States, were you immediately in Oregon Hillsboro School District or were you somewhere before?

No, we came directly to the Hillsboro School District.

How old were you?

I was seven and a half.

Describe your first experiences with school in the United States.

The first day of second grade, the teacher was calling the attendance and all I understood was when you hear your name say 'present' or make some acknowledgment so she went through the whole list and she got to the bottom and she said 'Santa? We have a Santa here?' and the kids all laughed. Of course, it wasn't how I knew my name to be pronounced—I didn't say anything and at the end of the roll call she noticed I hadn't said anything and she said 'Well, who are you?' and I said 'I'm Sonta' and so that was the first experience knowing that they just didn't have any experience with Hispanic kids and the language—the Spanish language.

Were there any other experiences like?

There were far better ones that was just a weird introduction. But by the end of the year I was winning all the spelling bees in school and I actually liked it—I loved the reading and I guess I was a pretty academic person.

How comfortable did you feel in school during that time?

It was pretty awkward that first year because my brother and I were the only two colored people at the time and I think there was another boy that moved to that school and then left within a couple of months and it wasn't until the following year when there was another Hispanic boy and maybe his brother attending that school, but our backgrounds were pretty different too so we didn't really associate.

Where was he from?

He was from Mexico.

Did you have tension because he was from Mexico?

No, but by then it was the following year so it would have been my third grade year. I just wasn't speaking Spanish at home that much anymore and so it had gone into the background of my life.

So you were at different levels basically?

Yeah.

Did you feel that you had the same opportunities as other non-Hispanic students?

I would say yes, after I learned English—before I learned English my instruction was at a different school. I was enrolled at Brookwood but then I was sent to school for half the day because there was someone there that spoke Spanish and so they figured well it would be the best for me.