FHS Oral History Project – Thamara Bejarano

Description:

Thamara Bejarano was born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1978. A daughter of two journalists, Thamara recalled her experience growing up in Caracas, especially in the 1990s. She explained in detail the 1998 election, in which Hugo Chavez gained power, leading to the kleptocracy that continues to plague the nation today. Given that Thamara and her parents worked in media, she highlighted how the Chavez and Nicolas Maduro regimes impacted her family professionally and personally. Thamara recounted a particularly harrowing incident during her time as a professor of Film Studies at the *Universidad Central de Venezuela, which* ultimately led her to flee the country. Thamara arrived in the United States in 2014, building several important and impressive cultural organizations that highlight different perspectives across the varied cultural landscape of Latin Americans in Orlando, specifically, and other underserved communities in the United States generally. Among these cultural organizations that Thamara emphasized included Open Scene, Prolifica, Latin Festival of Performing Arts, and Open Zine. Lastly, she shared her broader experiences living in Orlando as a Venezuelan woman and entrepreneur, particularly how the city has changed culturally and how the cultural landscape might change in the future.

Thamara wished to share the following note with her oral history description:
"As I mentioned, Chávez won the 1998 elections with a 70% abstention rate and a margin of just 300,000 votes over his main opponent. As soon as he took office, he implemented immediate constitutional changes, altering the names and scope of all public institutions, from the National Congress to the ministries. He extended the presidential term by two years and approved indefinite re-election. In 2001, following a national strike protesting his arbitrary actions, Chávez dismissed 30,000 PDVSA employees on live television. PDVSA was Venezuela's main oil company and the sixth-largest in the world. From that point on, the regime began taking control of the media; those that couldn't be bought were forcibly shut down through exorbitant fines that bankrupted many, while others faced criminal prosecution for continuing to resist. Life for journalists became impossible. Public universities were infiltrated by government militias in charge of security, meaning that opposing the regime came at a heavy cost—loss of peace, as it did for me, or even loss of life, as it did for many others. Since then, and to this day, even a social media post can lead to imprisonment. The many peaceful protests we participated in were met with increasing government brutality, culminating in tanks firing on buildings or running over demonstrators. Venezuela, once one of the richest countries in the world, and for decades before Chávez had donated water and electricity to neighboring Colombia and Brazil, reached a point where even toilet paper was unavailable. To this day, people still lack regular water service and power outages persist. Conservative estimates from various international observers report that more than 8 million Venezuelans have been forced to emigrate during these 25 years of tyranny and kleptocracy. Between 2014 and 2018 alone, 12,500 people were imprisoned as political prisoners. By 2020, over 20,000 people had lost their lives—either directly at the hands of the regime or indirectly due to the severe shortages of food and medicine it created."

Transcription:

00;00;00 - 00;00;17

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Thamara Bejarano on February 8th, 2025, at Audubon Church for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Before we begin, can you please state your name, your date of birth, and where you were born?

00;00;17 - 00;00;23
THAMARA BEJARANO: Thamara Bejarano. October 4th, 1978. Caracas, Venezuela.

00;00;23 - 00;00;33
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Tell me about your experiences growing up in Caracas during the 80s and the 90s. What was that like?

00;00;33 - 00;03;12
THAMARA BEJARANO: Okay. The 80s, I was very young, very, very, very, very young. So, I'm more of a person of the 90s and 2000s. I'm the daughter of two journalists. My father worked in television, RC-TV. It was a big thing. And my mother worked at El Universal, a very important newspaper. So, that gave me a wonderful…a very childhood path of knowledge and news and let's talk about these and that. I went to a German school for 11 years. It is different than here. You go to school your whole life, and it's not like they're changing you. So, it was great. And then I graduated high school. I went to the university. I'm a journalist. I have my bachelor's degree in journalism and then a couple of post-graduate degrees in audiovisual management and creative media. But when you ask me about leaving how was life in those days? Wonderful. Venezuela was extremely, extremely rich country small and very, very, very rich still today. Well, we have the largest reserves of oil in the world. So, no more than 30 million people, 30 something. Now, with 9 million Venezuelans living outside Venezuela…but, well, it was it was great. It was rich of culture, of opportunity, even poor people there looks different than poor people from other countries. Something that I learned here. I mean, everybody had more access to everything in general. So it was very rich. It was very excited and exciting in a certain way. With this sense of opportunity everywhere, it doesn't matter what social class you were. It's like there were opportunities for people. So that was the feeling of those decades.

00;03;12 - 00;03;24
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And since you are the daughter of two journalists, were you more aware of current events, even like when you were a teenager or, you know, earlier in your life than a typical child would be?

00;03;24;24 - 00;04;58
THAMARA BEJARANO: I think so, and I learned that living outside Venezuela now, I understood after 11 years living here in the States, I understood that I had more…how you said…*alcance* [reach]. I had more opportunity to understand not only our local situation, but globally. And that's another thing that makes Venezuelans very particular—when you start getting in contact with people from other Latin communities here, you notice that if they know something, they know a lot about themselves. In Venezuela I think it was it is because of a geographical placing in the world. We had access to everywhere. So we have a huge influence from Europe. We had a lot of access from what was going on here in the United States. And so we are very, very, very diverse and multicultural. So, yes, if you add to that the fact that you

live with journalists, that where all the time soaked in what was going on in the world, it gave you a, yeah, a different perspective of how things were developing and why.

00;04;58 - 00;06;38
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And did the fact that your parents were journalists [did] that inspired you to be in this field of broadcasting and journalism?

00;05;09 - 00;06;38
THAMARA BEJARANO: No, I didn't want to do that because I knew for a fact that it was a very hard life to live, especially with my mother. She was a warrior. She passed away two years ago. She was a real warrior. And everything was very intense. But, yeah, I wanted to go to the university to get my bachelor's degree in art. But my parents were a little bit like, no. So I decided to go to the journalism school, like, trying to find something in the middle. And I was working already in audiovisual productions, so I know I liked films, I know I like the storytelling through audiovisuals. It was something in the middle. And that's how I ended being journalist. But always, I consider myself that I'm a journalist not looking for the news but looking for other kinds of perspective. So everything that I write, I don't consider myself that journalist you know "breaking news"—no it is more in the sense of a writer, more in the way of literature maybe.

00;06;38;23 - 00;06;43;17
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Talk to me about the 1998 election in Venezuela.

00;06;43 - 00;07;17
THAMARA BEJARANO: Well, wonderful. 1988 election of Venezuela. First fact, Chavez won that the election with a 70% of *abstención* [abstention]—I don't know how to say that in English—people that don't that didn't vote. So it should have been nullified, but…*no fue, no paso* [it wasn't, it didn't happen]. I learned that…what kind of story do you want from that, the regular one or the real one?

00;07;17 - 00;07;19
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: The real one. The real one.

00;07;19 - 00;07;21
THAMARA BEJARANO: The real one.

00;07;21 - 00;07;24
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: From your perspective.

00;07;24;05 - 00;09;59
THAMARA BEJARANO: All the media—don't ask me why I think there is supreme powers moving the world—so all the media created what we call…I don't know how to say this in English…opinion matrixes, *matrices de opinion* [opinion matrices]. Agendas let's say with the purpose of, I don't know, moving…I don't know. So we were part of a campaign—and you can go back to newspapers and to the archive of television those days—and we were creating this sense of everything was chaotic, everything is unknown, is the end of the world, the end of the

world is coming soon, everything was a disaster. And it wasn't like that. It was a creation to then put this person [Chavez] as a hero rescuing what was about to be destroyed. And it was a lie. And it was…we have a saying in Spanish that *no es lo mismo llamar al demonio que ver lo llegar* [it is not the same to call the devil than to see him arrive]…it is not the same to summon the demon than seeing him arrive. So it was like that at that time. My family personally, the telephone of my house of my parents' home was bugged because I told you El Universal was a very big thing, and my mother kept pushing these ideas of, "hey, this is wrong." This is going on. So it was very, very, very difficult, 1998. People thought it was just another election. We were rich. We were fine. It's just all politicians are corrupt and I won't vote. I'm going to the beach that Sunday—all election days are on Sunday. And nobody voted. And that's what happened in 1998. I don't know if you're aware of a very violent tsunami—no, it's not, how you say land…landslide…

00;09;59 - 00;10;00
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Earthquake?

00;10;00 - 00;10;05
THAMARA BEJARANO: No. *Un deslave* [landslide].

00;10;05 - 00;10;06
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: *Bueno…*[Well…].

00;10;06 - 00;10;48
THAMARA BEJARANO: No. I don't remember the word, but in a state next to Caracas, where the main airport is, that state is called *Vargas* or *La Guaira*, it kept raining and raining for days and suddenly the water from the mountain just crashed. So it was very, very difficult. And it was the same—it was in December. Elections were in December. So everything was like happening at the same time.

00;10;48 - 00;10;58
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And once Chavez took power, did the state absorb the media company that your mom worked in?

00;10;58 - 00;13;21
THAMARA BEJARANO: I think El Universal was one of the last ones to be bought by the government. But for example, in 2010, I don't remember…I'm forgetting things. I was a professor at the School of Journalism in Central University of Venezuela. I loved my role there. And there is, I don't know how is here I think it is different, but when you have those positions is because you win that position through very difficult steps, administrative steps. It's just the best of the best that can get that. And I did it very young and it was like, oh my God, it was amazing. So I got that at the university—that is public, run by the state, but at the same time, it has independence from the state…it is autonomous or was I don't know now. And I was working for a newspaper called *Últimas Noticias*. *Últimas Noticias* was the first big media that the government bought. So the first thing that they did was—to give you an example—they bought them in December, and I was writing for this section of real estate and architecture and [they] just starting changing words—keeping my signature. But if I said there's a contraction in

the market, they said the market is getting better. So as a journalist you cannot do that at least remove my name from that. So I was forced in that sense to quit that job because you cannot keep letting words that you didn't write and that are clearly trying to benefit the regime. You cannot let that to be outside in your name. So I quit to that.

00;13;21 - 00;13;23
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what year was that?

00;13;23 - 00;14;47
THAMARA BEJARANO: What year? Okay. So that will be, sorry, but I don't remember well. That should be 2012. I guess 2012-2013 because I came here in the '14. So I know I quit first to *Últimas Noticias*, then I was forced to leave the university because again it is public. It is autonomous. But the security in the university were run by one of their collectives of the government collective. So if something happened to you inside, you cannot call the police because of the autonomy. But at the same time, they're the ones running the business—[if they] heard you, who are you going to complain with? So you are trapped. And that's what happened with me. And it started with several things. I don't know if you want me to talk about that, but we can, if you want me to. Okay. So, my subject, I was teaching Film Studies I and II. One is mandatory for you to graduate. The other one was, how you say it?

00;14;47 - 00;14;48
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Elective?

00;14;48;13 - 00;16;34
THAMARA BEJARANO: Elective. So I had every kind of students, right. I had one that was part of that guerrilla—of that collective. And he just wanted me to put the note [grade] and leave [him] alone. So I refused. Surprisingly, my windshield appeared broken, then the tire, and again, again, again. And after, a few things. So several things. One night, I remember I was finishing the notes of that semester, and two guys put me against the wall outside of the classroom. It was night. Nobody were there. With a gun at my head, they say if we see you again [THAMARA mouthed "b**ch"], we kill you, we not kidding this time. Before that my assistant was *golpeado* [beaten] beaten. And when I asked him, Ramon, let's denounce that, he said, "with whom?" It was one of the security guys of the school. So everything around me started to hurt other people. So I was convinced that I needed to leave.

00;16;34 - 00;16;36
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. Absolutely.

00;16;36 - 00;16;39
THAMARA BEJARANO: In order to protect other people and protect myself.

00;16;39 - 00;17;02
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. And to backtrack just a little bit. So we talked about 1998. So basically from '98 to 2010-ish, how was your life different personally and professionally after that election?

00;17;02 - 00;21;40
THAMARA BEJARANO: Okay. So when Chavez won that first election, it was the first time that I could vote because I was turning 18 that year. So you just were there witnessing changes, being outraged. And "how is this possible" and "that is possible." And you heard Cubans saying, "hey, be careful, that happened in Cuba." And we very arrogantly said we are not Cuba. And it happened. The same—scraped everything. So, let's say the first years of Chavez regime, I was studying, I was in the university, so I was working as an audiovisual producer. The productive apparatus where it was, let's say, the same, I mean, you have more inflation, you have certain crisis, but you still have money moving. So it was very difficult to say, "no, we are getting into a crisis." We were getting into a political social crisis, but money was still moving. I graduated in the 2000s and finished the post graduate degrees in 2000s [inaudible]. And I enjoyed the productive career in the academia and in the newspaper for, let's say, five years, but productive because, for example, in the university, I was able to give the students an open room to critically think and talk about things through media, through films. So it was always an open discussion and I'm very proud of that. It was dangerous. I didn't—you never understand the real danger until you get hurt. Yeah. But yet at the same time that I was, let's say, thriving in my career, I started working very young. I started working at 17 in audiovisual production. So, I was working already, but this was like it "Oh, I finally got the life that I want." But, for example, my parents were losing the life that they had and with very much effort they created. So the RC-TV, that channel RC-TV, was closed by the government. That was the first, the largest, I believe, attack to freedom of speech. And it was done in a very legal—with big *comillas* [quotation marks—air quoting] because they just simply refuse to renew the license to broadcast, so it was legal, but I mean…. So it's very dangerous. People need to understand these for trying to not repeat and live the same things in the future. But again, So they were losing their spaces, my parents, my mother was no longer working with *El Universal*. Newspapers in general started to auto-censor themselves. So for those years in particular, the feeling was that we are okay, let's go through these, but at the same time, everything in terms of government was being set to put in place this absolutely authoritarian regime that is the kleptocracy that we have had for 25 years.

00;21;40; - 00;22;22
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And, you know, it's interesting because you and your parents worked in media and as we've been discussing, you know, typically, with communist regimes, that's the first point of attack the media corporations. But you decided, especially once you were teaching, not to fall to that agenda. I'm just curious. I want to know where did that belief came from? Was that from your parents or was that from something else? Just talk to me about that interesting dynamic.

00;22;22 - 00;26;50
THAMARA BEJARANO: Well, first, let's be careful with labeling things. Venezuela's, regime—Chavez regime and now Maduro, well now ten years Maduro—sell themselves as communists. That's not communism. That's just kleptocracy. That's populism. And populist come from all colors. So it's very dangerous because we have this tendency to say, "oh, that's how communist work and we need to—" No, that's how all populists and all tyrants and all authoritarian regimes work. Yes, first the media. There is a magnificent example with the Soviet Union. The first thing that they do first because it was to extend the territory that they needed to

connect with all corners. So they, they put a lot of effort in developing radio and then through film, because that's how they thought we can create the “New Man” through this, because it was easier for people to have—200, 500 people in a dark room—showing these images that were more palatable, let's say, than me teaching you, “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” So they understood that media was the best way to manipulate people’s minds. That was learned by Nazis and perfected by the Nazis. I mean, you're talking about communists and things. So here you have these very left Communist Soviet Union, and then you have this very right Nazi movement of Germans that they perfected what Soviets were doing and, and the machinery of marketing because it was marketing that they developed and used to wash people minds.

So, yes, I think it was my parents, but not because my parents instructed me to but because you when you have the opportunity—that's what I believe so deeply in art and education—because art and education, what give you is the opportunity to be in front of knowledge of perspective of another way of seeing things, and with that you can process, “oh look, green, blue, red, bird. Oh I think this is this.” So I profoundly believe in academia. But just as a space to get in touch with that knowledge, different knowledge from different sources. And that's how you create critical minds. Not you cannot impose definitions. And this is what I thought the economy that but that we have right now is because someone named Smith was famous in certain moment of the history, until someone else say, I think that was wrong. Let's jump to another. Let me move from the economy. I'd say traditional physics and quantum physics and, I think we were doing we were understanding things wrong. Now we should see that physics with these and these and say, oh, really? Well, smoking in the 50s was very glamorous. And it was consciously sold as a way for women to liberate themselves. It was just a marketing campaign and everything bought it. And you have doctors saying, “oh, you should smoke because smoke is good.” And now you say, “Oh, it gives you cancer, you shouldn't smoke.” So yeah, they didn't impose any criteria. But I was very lucky to have the opportunity to just be there and listen, listening to them exchanging points of view and perspective. And that helped me create my own—right, wrong—but my own.

00;26;50 - 00;27;06
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. No, that's a great point. So you mentioned earlier that you left around 2014. You left Venezuela in 2014. Did you always envision leaving?

00;27;06 - 00;31;15
THAMARA BEJARANO: Never in my life. If it was something that I was so sure—absolutely sure, that's why you can never be sure of anything—it was that I will never leave Venezuela because you didn't need to. It was great. Nobody leave Venezuela. I mean, you can have one person. My dream is to go to the Himalayas and live among the monks. But you can have that. I want to go to Hollywood. You can have that, but never in my generation, in my parents’ generation, or in my grandparents’ generation, you don't have this idea of leaving or going anywhere, but for tourism. Because at the same time we were and maybe you here in the United States, you didn't know that you don't have to know it, but we were the American Dream in a certain way. And some people that use Venezuela as a passage to come to the United States, when people thought about, “we want a better life in United States,” they just landed in Venezuela because you need to make a stop, and they stayed forever. It was dreamy. It was amazing. It was—you need to understand that not only wealth, but Venezuela was formed in a

very progressive sense, even when the first militaries were building the republic. Even they were very progressive. And then almost 50 years of democracy before Chavez, we were social democrats. And the model of economy, and the social model that we were following was the model that Sweden, Norway and Denmark has. So we were very progressive. We had in our DNA a very profound sense of social wellness. You can live this through the silliest example that you can mention—even sharing the food. We were I don't know how to say it raised no because it is not something that you learn from your parents. Society was like that. We are generous. That ship packed with Jewish that nobody else in the world accepted not even United States, we received them. All the South American countries, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil that during the 70s and 80s had these horrible military regimes, they all went to Venezuela, and they were receiving our academy, in our universities, in our media. So we have this thing is like it's like, you know, these, DNA tests is very difficult because you take a Venezuela like me. I did the test recently just for a joke. I'm 70% European because I'm 50% from Spain. Then 50 from Portugal. And then I don't know why but from Italy. And then I have a percentage of native of South America and from black people. So we are so blended that we understand that it is natural to be that everyone here is from somewhere else. So, yeah. I forgot your question.

00;31;15 - 00;31;17
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: That if you ever envisioned…

00;31;17;01 - 00;31;53
THAMARA BEJARANO: Never in my life. Never in my life. And short answer. I'm here because my best friend that was very worried about me, she told me, "Thamara, you need to leave now. Now it is not a joke." And I said, "But where? I don't have family outside [Venezuela], I don't know." She said, "Go to the United States. They're taking political *asiles* [asylums]." So, I said sure. I visited many times [as] tourism. But it was completely out of my mind. And here I am 11 years after that advice.

00;31;53 - 00;32;28
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: But to that point that you were saying before, given that South America, but Venezuela in particular as you've been saying it's so multicultural, so diverse, were you as culturally shocked when you finally came to the United States, since, you know, people always say the United States is such a diverse place, but you came from a similar place. So were you as—what were your first impressions when you came here? I should clarify also, where did you—Orlando directly?

00;32;28 - 00;38;32
THAMARA BEJARANO: Miami. I live six months in Miami, two months in Michigan in Kalamazoo. And then here. Yes. We have a lot of diversity here too, of multiculturality. But I think the main difference—and maybe you experts from history and investigations and research could correct me—I think there's a huge difference in how you build your societies. One very challenging thing that we had in Venezuela is that we were also mixed, that we didn't create a Venezuelan brand, let's say every I mean, I could never do it, but I could say I'm from Spain, you know, so they there was a lack of pride as this is our homeland, and we defend that, and now we have an idea of what to be Venezuelan and how important thing is to take care of that. On the contrary, the United States work very well in building this idea. I love to call it this

branding thing of what is the United States. A little bit, overworked in certain aspects. But if you take that and you take the way Venezuela was created, with progressive minds behind, with these social Democrats in the foundation versus a country that in the 50s, hunted people with the left and lefty ideas. And what is to be left and what is to be right talking in political spectrum. Well, a tendency to be more worried about the social and the other side to give priority to the revenue of corporations. So that was very, as you said, the word, strike me, struck me [shocked], that was very shocking because that creates this path to selfishness. So people here are very in the individualism, let's say I worry about myself and that's my only thing to worry about. So if you see someone dying there, first it is not your job to help them. And second, you can be sued. I mean, it was created this idea that even with that you change people minds is like, no, don't help anyone to stand up if they fall because they could sue you. That's crazy. That's very disturbing. So you have that you have a society that are together under this hat of we are Americans but at the same time behind the hat, fragments of wishes and desires and challenges and not this idea of being together to go and to follow dreams or challenge together.

That is worse in the Latin communities because we have another layer of complication and is that we don't call ourselves Hispanics or Latins outside of the United States. I'm Venezuelan or Colombian or I'm Cuban. You never heard “Oh, we are Hispanics.” That doesn't work like that. And when you're here, you are sometimes forced by the system to label yourself as something that, first, is not a race. Because I speak three languages, so it's just because of the language I speak that I'm German in the next five minutes. So, it doesn't work like that naturally. So we need to adapt to that. And then to separate the isolation. So all the different Latin communities are, they're separated. So my experience working in the arts, trying to say, well, we share these, these cultural heritage, let's say we're different. I know you're Colombian. You're completely different from me. But we are neighbors. We have a shared heritage, a shared history somehow. But, again, it's not appealing to say, “come Hispanic community”—who? So you need to say, “hey, you, Colombian, I see you, I hear you,” “you Brazilian—I know we speak different languages, it's not the same—but let's come here.” So it's very, very, very challenging. It was very challenging and is still very shocking.

00;38;32;21 - 00;39;07
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. I'm glad you brought that up. Because I think if you're not from a Hispanic community, it's very difficult for one to see that, to see that huge difference between someone that is native, Venezuelan, native, Colombian, native South American and how that shifts once you're here in the United States, when they, as you said, the system tries to categorize you in one box, but we're not one box.

00;39;07 - 00;39;53
THAMARA BEJARANO: Sorry. It happens with a lot of communities. It is like, they keep calling here Africa like if Africa is one country. Africa is a continent with a lot of countries. And when you say Latin is like if it's exchangeable Latin and Hispanic—no Haitians are Latin and they are our neighbors, but they speak Creole. Same with Brazil. Brazil is huge. We have borders with Brazil, but they speak Portuguese. So it's more, more, more challenging and complex that I understand they need to simplify things, but sometimes it’s almost impossible.

00;39;53 - 00;40;13
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. And once you arrived here in, in 2014, how did you envision continuing your media career in the United States, or were you thinking something entirely different when you got here?

00;40;13 - 00;43;56
THAMARA BEJARANO: After healing the trauma because it was like an initial trauma. I want to highlight that I left my life in the best point I thought—I was living the dream and I left that. So it was initially like a very strong trauma. And then I said, okay, I'm here. Let's do the best that I can do. I understood that media was impossible because just researching, I learned that here you don't need to go to university to study journalism, anyone can…I mean it is very different. Even in Venezuela, if you are a broadcaster and you want to advertise, you need to have a certificate for that. You need to go to school two years and get…if you want to interview someone in a public media, you need to be a journalist that went to the university for five years. So here was like, "well, anybody? Oh, okay." Well, I had a horrible experience with a journalist, someone that had a radio show. They charged me. They wanted to charge me for the interview, and I said, "What? That's completely illegal." And then someone explain me that here is legal, that actually all those famous people in the famous talk shows and stuff, they're being paid. That's how institutional marketing work. But that's completely illegal in Venezuela that the College of Journalism, the Association of Journalists can get your license from you. So, no. I understood that journalism wasn't the way for me here and also because we don't have media, at least in Orlando. We only have one newspaper. That's incredible. Every time I mentioned that my father, my father say "Why? But why? But they have a lot of money. They have a lot of people. How's that?" It is weird. We have just one big newspaper. So journalist for what, for whom? So, we created a beautiful digital magazine and doing catharsis with that. But, no journalism. So I said, okay, so what I'm going to do let me do what I wanted. What I always wanted was doing art, working in art. And that's how I started, first at Mad Cow Theater, an organization that doesn't exist already, but they used to have this beautiful theater downtown, in Church Street. And I worked with them as an actress, as an adapter, as a stage manager, and they had a program of Spanish theater that was just like dramatic reading and workshops and, I don't know, I think I felt a little bit. And then we started doing whole productions, but, in 2019, I said, okay, this is not enough. How is possible that 35% of Orlando's population is from Hispanic origins, and we are the only ones doing this? This is impossible. So I created Open Scene for that.

00;43;56 - 00;44;04
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And how has your business evolved since 2019? There was a pandemic that happened.

00;44;04 - 00;44;06
THAMARA BEJARANO: Yeah.

00;44;06 - 00;44;09
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: But even besides that how has it involved?

00;44;09 - 00;45;26

THAMARA BEJARANO: I mean it's great, I love it. I'm very scared right now, I won't lie. We are moving in a very difficult historical moment. It was great. And I say it was great because we were benefited with all the progress that started running, trying to give more visibility to underserved communities. So after the pandemic, like in 2021, everything started accelerating. And it was great. We took advantage of that. We grew. We put a lot of content out there. We generated a lot of opportunities. And we still are that very small organization that is elbow by elbow with the largest cultural organizations here. Sometimes, yeah, I think that people are more comfortable now. But, they were like, "How did these people did this?" And I think I'm proud of that.

00;45;26 - 00;45;33
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And can you just clarify for the listeners, what exactly is the mission of Open Scene?

00;45;33 - 00;47;32
THAMARA BEJARANO: Okay, that's a tough one because it's on the reservation right now. No, I'm just joking. We cannot change what we are. The core of what we do is trying to bring the best of the best, cultural and artistic content and opportunities to all kinds of people. We are proud of presenting experiences, unexpected experiences, art installations, festivals. We have the Latin Performing Arts Festival. And for example, last year we brought from New York Odd Man Out—that is the only blind theatrical show in the United States. It was amazing. People loved it. We have brought the best theater makers and professionals of arts and culture to Orlando. We have generated paid opportunities, compensated opportunity for more than 500 creators, and that's a lot for a very small organization. How we did that or how we still do that because we decided to put first artists so we don't have a huge payroll. We were just two people, and the rest volunteers. But two people wearing all the hats and receiving half of the money they should. But we are there bringing opportunities and trying to, as I said at the beginning, put these different perspective, these global points of view there for people to take home them and create their own, their own ideas, they can reshape stereotypes just being exposed to different experiences.

00;47;32 - 00;47;57
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And talk to me about your experience more broadly since founding and launching Open Space. Scene. Sorry. Open Scene. Thank you. Of what it's like to be a Venezuelan businesswoman in Orlando. And the impact you think you've had.

00;47;57 - 00;48;49
THAMARA BEJARANO: It's challenging because we have very rich and generous community here in Orlando, but that are not used to all kind of experiences that are available out there. Another level of the challenge in terms of, specifically the arts is that in the United States, for example, their understanding of what theater is, is completely different from what we have because we are, let's say, formed by the European model. So we don't have a lot of musicals. And so we have theater—like theater…like theater, but here theater…

00;48;49 - 00;48;51
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Like performances, like acting?

00;48;51 - 00;51;54
THAMARA BEJARANO: Well, no, the musicals are beautifully acted and performed, but, I mean, there are musicals. People sing and sing sing sing. It's like you need, I don't want to be rude, but some truths don't need to be sung. So, it's just another way. There's not only the United States way. There's a lot of very old traditions out there. So that's difficult because that's what we understand as theater. But again, we are very happy because we have been able to present and to expose people and to give them the opportunity to all kind of people, because one of the most innovative things that we do that we offer, we invested in artificial intelligence to offer live translation in more than 25 languages. So it doesn't matter the language of what we're presenting. If you are from Brazil, you can get the translation in Portuguese. If it's in Spanish, you will get it in whatever you want. So that's important because what we want is to expose people first to these ideas, to be to these ways of seeing life or of storytelling, of sharing stories and, and then to the language. Almost everything that we do is multiple lingual. We are opening an art installation in Winter Park this week. And if you see it, it's a piece of art by his Gisela Romero, a Venezuelan American artist. And you read it, and it has words in Spanish, in English. And everything that we do is like that. So it's been challenging for people to understand who we are and what we do because we are not—you have here a very difficult barrier that is the stereotype of what is to be Latin. So when you think about Hispanic, people think about mariachi, and it is not a bad thing. But they—never asked me if I'm Mexican, I love Mexicans—they ask me if I'm from Brazil. I don't know, maybe my skin or my face. They don't know where to fit it. But the thing is that it's so great and multiple the idea of being Latin that you cannot just reduce it to the mariachi or to flowers or to have folk music. It is more and more and more and more deep and profound and diverse.

00;51;54 - 00;52;02
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. Talk to me a little bit about Prolifica?

00;52;02 - 00;52;02
THAMARA BEJARANO: Prolifica?

00;52;02 - 00;52;08
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Prolifica. Talk to me a little bit about that 20 episode audiovisual journey.

00;52;08 - 00;55;24
THAMARA BEJARANO: Well, that's a cute question. Prolifica means prolific. Prolific means that it is very fertile, let's say. During the pandemic, as you mentioned, we were born on 2019, February, and our first production was in October at the Mares Festival and then in November at Fusion Fest and then the pandemic hit. So. So it was a very short start. I took the whole year creating these, I did a very, very thorough research. That's one thing that I really appreciate from my journalist background, very, very thorough research and created these audiovisual short pieces, highlighting the most important cultural productions of each of the Hispanic countries, starting with Spain and then from Argentina to Venezuela in alphabetical order. That's why we have 20. I know I left behind one very, very tiny, country that they speak Spanish. I don't remember where. Sorry. Excuse me. I know there's that country, but it was too difficult to.

And I left, I felt bad because I left out, Brazil. But it was complicated to put this Portuguese side when we were talking about "Hispanicity." So it was absolutely challenging but somehow found a way to connect all the talent here in Orlando, all the actors, all the voices and some musicians. And they were also so willing to participate and to generously put their talent to this. And that was that. It was a lot of WhatsApp audios. I curated fragments of poems, some fragments of books, and they send me the audios, and then I edited that thing. The first two episodes, Spain and Argentina, I did them completely with material and public domain. And then I started using things that were important to be shared. I asked permission for everything. So everything in those videos were granted permission. So it was huge.

00;55;24 - 00;55;45
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You then created the Latin Performing Arts Festival, a one week gathering annually of 100 plus artists. When did you create that? And just talk to me a little bit about the purpose of that festival and why it's important for you to maintain it.

00;55;46 - 00;59;28
THAMARA BEJARANO: I will tell you the real story because you deserve it. When I created Open Scene—and you asked me that in the last question and I think I didn't reply—I wanted to create here something that I was very proud to have in Venezuelan and in several countries in Latin America and Europe, that is an international theater festival. I could not believe that there's not an international theater festival here. Yeah, Miami have the Hispanic International Theater Festival, but I mean an international festival the way we lived it in Caracas, they still do in Bogota and in Buenos Aires in several countries, Avignon in France. The International Theater Festival in Caracas was this huge thing, where you have an entire 15 days of performances, a lot of them outdoors. A lot of those outdoors—huge—I mean, imagine, like you're taken by a French company creating a floating city with fire. That's how the presentations were. So you have groups from Australia, from Brazil, from France. It was unbelievable. There were free most of that. You have indoors performances in the beautiful theaters. But that happened in Caracas but then extended to all to other cities. So I said "how this is Orlando, that's impossible. Why we don't have that." And I created an international theater festival, outdoor theater festival. I presented that, after talking with the companies, I started the negotiations with this company in France with two companies in Spain and one in Argentina. And I had everything. I had the writers. I had all the budget. $700,000 was the cost of the whole festival—completely free to take the whole Eola Park. And I presented as, "of course, the city will love this." And I asked an appointment with Mr. Terry Olson that was at that time, the Director of Cultural Affairs of Orange County. And he received me, and I say, I explain, I showed him the slides of everything, and I say, and it's just $700,000 for me, it was like a bargain. It was very, very cheap. And he—I will never forget—he just look at me say, "Where did you tell me you come from?" And I say, okay, these will be very difficult. And I thought I will need to start a little bit smaller. And that's what I did. I changed that. I learned very quickly. I understood in that moment that you cannot come here with huge things. You need to start small and then you grow. So finally in 2001 [2021], I said, okay, now we can have a Latin Performing Arts Festival first. And that's how I created that that year.

00;59;28 - 00;59;31
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 2021.

00;59;31 - 01;03;02
THAMARA BEJARANO: And that year I brought together the best of what we had here. And it was the music, and it was theater. And I say, well, now that I rented Mad Cow Theater at the time, and I said, well, now that we have the walls, we need to put some artwork there too, because there's not enough space to show the work. So, from the beginning, it was visual arts, performing arts. It was music, it was dance. So we had a little bit of everything, and it keeps growing. As I say it, last year we brought Odd Man Out from New York. We brought Gala Hispanic Theater. The Gala has 40 years of existence from Washington, D.C. We brought Thebas Land, a wonderful piece from Uruguayans, Sergio Blanco produced by Arca Images. Artistic Director of Arca Images is Nilo Cruz. Nilo Cruz is the only Latin that has won a Pulitzer Award. And now his picture is in the Smithsonian last week. So it's like a very huge thing. And it's very difficult Sebastian because you need to create new path and say when panelist evaluating if they award you a grant or not. They said, but who validates you because here you've been validated by media or because you know who Tennessee Williams is. But what happens when you have huge authors that you don't know because you only know about the author is from here so is less than Tennessee Williams or it's just that you don't know who he is? And again, we only have, oh my God, God bless Matt Poe, he's the only critic and he doesn't speak Spanish, so he doesn't need to know who Sergio Blanco, who is winning awards all over the world. And is considered the new Federico Garcia Lorca. We don't know to know about him because we're here. So it's been it's been rolling for this year. I need to say this, this year is going to be even amazing because finally, I will be able to offer what I wanted from the beginning. It is going to be pay what you wish. We are going to do it at the entire campus of the A&H Museums of Maitland. They're divine. They are generous. They are fantastic. So we are going to have the different productions all over the campus. And I'm very, very proud. But we moved from June to September, so it's going to be from the 22nd of September to the 28th.

01;03;02 - 01;03;04
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Excellent. Congratulations.

01;03;04 - 01;03;33
THAMARA BEJARANO: Thank you. And we're ringing—oh my goodness. Oh my God. If the politics allow we're bringing a wonderful group from France. So it will be the first international in person that we're going to have. We're going to have the new piece of Nilo Cruz. So we are just dreaming.

01;03;33; - 01;03;40
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you also host a weekly live radio show called *En Tarima*...

01;03;40 - 01;03;42
THAMARA BEJARANO: *En Tarima*—On Stage.

01;03;42 - 01;03;51
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: On Stage, a co-production between MAS100.7 FM and Open Scene. So just talk to me about that experience.

01;03;51 - 01;03;53
THAMARA BEJARANO: Yeah. No. Not anymore.

01;03;53;12 - 01;03;53;29
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Okay.

01;03;53 - 01;04;47
THAMARA BEJARANO: Not anymore. We are not doing the podcast. We stopped doing that. But we switched for the digital magazine. I'm happy with that. I'm not using my voice. But I'm using my words. Yeah, so I'm glad of that. It was a great experience. We also were hosted by the Winter Park Library. They have beautiful equipment to record a podcast. And another wonderful equipment there for free. So please, community, take advantage of that. Be as creative as you can and as you want. But yeah, we stopped doing the podcast.

01;04;44 - 01;04;47
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And the digital magazine. What's it called?

01;04;47 - 01;05;01
THAMARA BEJARANO: Open Zine. With Z like zombie. It's been a year and a half now, I believe. It started in June. Yeah, a year and a half.

01;05;01 - 01;05;06
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what do you explore in the magazine we share?

01;05;06;00 - 01;06;33
THAMARA BEJARANO: We have several collaborators. We share the different perspective about the cultural landscape. We have interviews, for example, this January issue, we interviewed Paloma Estévez. She's the new program director of the Lincoln Center. It's amazing what they're doing there. The one in November we got the Olga Garay-English, she's like the champion for Latino Arts in the United States. And this February, I'm giving you this breaking news, we're having an interview with the director of the largest museum of Ukraine. So, we will have that interview this issue in February. So, yeah, it's like that. And we [inaudible] writes about the perspective of an artist and the challenges, and it's a beautiful. We have recommendations on what to read, listen, and watch. It's very cute.

01;06;33 - 01;06;51
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Excellent. And you have been in the United States for 11 years. How has the cultural landscape changed in a decade in this country, and particularly in Orlando?

01;06;51 - 01;09;17
THAMARA BEJARANO: Until now, because since January everything apparently is changing in a very fast way. But before, let's say, until December 2024, I can say that the last six, seven years were completely palpable. It was amazing. Something happened. I don't know if several things aligned the same time—new leaders or new funds or I don't know why. You can blame immigration to that, because a lot of people have the power to change things around positively sometimes. But definitely, things change here and in Miami. I lived in Miami the first

six months, and as I told you before, in 2014 and Miami was just a town to go to the beach and go shopping. That transformation, that cultural mecca that Miami apparently is now it's just six, seven years ago. And so I think it's a combination of people demanding things. I know that, again, we Venezuelans came here with an experience that you cannot you erase, you know, you cannot delete that. So I guess a lot of people is crying. If you don't find something, you build it and that's what I did. Ah, no, this doesn't exist. Let me build it. Let me create it. A combination of that and a new policies of maybe more conscious effort in elevating culturally, maybe from the leaders. I don't know. But yes, things have changed very positively, but we still need to do a lot of work.

01;09;17 - 01;09;26
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And in what ways do you think Orlando specifically will change in the next, let's say, 20 years?

01;09;27 - 01;11;33
THAMARA BEJARANO: Ah Sebastian, don't ask me that. We were in a very good path. You can feel out there that people wanted to do more. There's always people that prefer things to stay, without change, but then they adapt. Change is always good. The only thing that is very worrying, to be honest, is United States haven't had a very good history of investing public funds in art. We are falling behind all the countries in the world, apparently. And if you state don't invest in arts, if you don't invest in education, you be sure that you will fall behind as a society, that society won't have empathy, won't have this sense of togetherness and of evolution. So that's very, worrisome because we see what is going on. The cuts, cuts, cuts, cuts. And so that could be very dangerous for everything. We are looking in the things that we write, in the things we have in the website, we are looking at a list of words that we cannot pronounce, we cannot pronounce woman. I don't know what to do. I don't know if I need to express "not man." It's very complicated. We can laugh about it, but it's very weird. Not even in Venezuela, I have to get into a list of forbidden words. That's weird. That's super weird. Especially for arts and education.

01;11;33 - 01;11;58
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. It's either you laugh because you don't want to cry. Absolutely. Well said. In what ways has your Venezuelan heritage influenced your perspective on life generally and living in the United States, Orlando specifically?

01;11;58 - 01;12;34
THAMARA BEJARANO: One thing I can say about *Venezolanidad*, about to be Venezuelan, is generosity. I didn't bring that knowledge from Venezuela. I learned it here, seeing all other communities and seeing ourselves interacting with other communities is a thing that I believe is very in print…I don't know how to say it's very…

01;12;34 - 01;12;35
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Ingrained?

01;12;35 - 01;12;45

THAMARA BEJARANO: Yeah. In the Venezuelan way of being, and you said the second part. Sorry.

01;12;45 - 01;12;52
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Oh, and, how that cultural background has influenced you living here?

01;12;52 - 01;16;08
THAMARA BEJARANO: That's for fact that we had the opportunity a lot of Venezuelans had the opportunity to go to the university—to have high studies. I don't know, we say *estudios superiores* [superior studies]. So, you got…education is free in Venezuela, but you have private school that you pay, of course, but, the majority of people prefer to go, for example, to the public university. You don't pay anything there, the best of the best, and even doctors get their degrees without paying anything. And there were programs like the *Grand Mariscal de Ayacucho* where people get their doctorates in France or whatever they want without paying anything. So that creates a human being that—as a doctor of medicine, you don't need to worry about paying the debts that you have because you studied this and that you just need to give back to the community. Right? That's a completely change of mindset. And that reflects, again, or is connected with the generosity aspect that I mentioned before. So I think we're bringing… sometimes I feel bad, I say nothing is going to be, nothing is going to last. But you hear people saying, no, yes, we are giving this one person at a time. And when you have the opportunity to put yourself in front of X situation, now that we're talking and I don't know, trying to give our best or not, but when you are in a difficult situation when you have an everyday exchange with Venezuela and you see that things can be different, that we can share the bread, that we can have a—this is very Caribbean, this thing of laugh about misery. And it gives you this—it sounds like cynical, but it's not. It's just, men enjoy life. And everything is a disaster, it's the end of the world. No. Let's have a drink. Let's talk about it. Let's play about it. Who knows? Tomorrow will be different. And that…it's beautiful because when you combine that with hard work that we do and we're very prepared and we're very resourceful in the sense of being able to find different solutions for one thing, it is not just a B, but we have a b, c d…that combination give you people very interesting and capable to bring solutions to the table and to generate real positive changes. I think that's our legacy, let's say.

01;16;08 - 01;16;23
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And lastly, if someone is listening to this recording 50 or 100 years from now, what would you want them to know about your culture and the state of Florida?

01;16;23 - 01;18;49
THAMARA BEJARANO: First, try not to fear. I mean, forget about being afraid of things. It's like we live every certain amount of years things get very difficult, very challenging. At the end of the day, everything that needs to happen, happened, no matter what you do. What you can do is to be calm, to be a person that love, to keep your heart pure. Florida and the United States in general, if you allow me with all respect, is like a kid that you can create a beautiful adult from that because there is the potential love generous, innocent people wanting to do good things. Or it could transform in a very spoiled bad adult. So. Fifty years, hundred years from now, I hope

because I will be watching, I hope that everybody decided right now to love and to put love out there and to understand that what we do to the other or not do I mean what we try to say, “That's not my problem. That's my neighbors problem” is always your problem. So generosity and love that will give you and be open, be open. And Florida has that potential. It was from Spain. It was the land of the native. Then Spain came then France came then England and the United States. And here we are. So it's like you just need to embrace the idea that we are all from everywhere and that we all need to be loved and respected. And I think that's it.

01;18;49 - 01;18;53
SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Thank you so much, Thamara. I really appreciate this oral history.

01;18;53 - 01;18;53
THAMARA BEJARANO: Thank you.