

Cynthia Hardy: So Tina, talk to me about how old you were when you first went to live at Gonzales Gardens, and what your childhood was like.

Tina Torres: So I lived there when I was... Let's see, I got my house when I was 25. So I had to be 22, 21, 22 when I lived there.

Cynthia Hardy: Okay. Did you have a lot of friends there, a lot of neighbors?

Tina Torres: No. Back then it was really rough for me. And so I basically stayed to myself. I had a few friends. And I just thought of another one that was there almost a little bit longer than me. I kind of just stayed to myself because I had three girls and I was worried about living in a project setting, if that makes sense, period, with three girls. And so I pretty much stayed to myself and I had a few girlfriends that I touched base with from time to time while living there. But I basically threw myself into the programs that were there at the time.

Cynthia Hardy: Talk to me about the programs.

Tina Torres: Well, there was the police department that formed a sub... I don't know what you would call it, but it was...

Cynthia Hardy: I remember the Koban.

Tina Torres: The Koban yes. I was completely involved with the Koban and I was down there pretty much every day, learning how to... After school programs for the kids. They also created a GED program, and at that time I didn't have my GED. So they were helping me with that. And then they also was doing some assistance with Columbia Urban League. And because of the Columbia Urban League, I was able to go to typing classes underneath Miss Beatrice McKnight.

Cynthia Hardy: Oh, yeah.

Tina Torres: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And so I learned how to type, I learned how to do letters. I learned how to do a lot of things that were admin secretarial stuff. So that helped me get a leg up, to be able to build myself up from where I was from being on welfare, food stamps, a welfare check, and Medicaid. So because of the Co Bond and because of the Columbia Urban league, I was able to move up a little bit more in life at that time.

Cynthia Hardy: It's interesting because Tina, I know you now and I know how accomplished you are, and I know what a leader you are in the community. So to hear you talk about humble beginnings and how you were able to get to a level of success that you have today, it kind of renews the faith in the fact that if we seek the right kinds of assistance to set us on a good path, then [crosstalk 00:04:47] in our lives. I mean, you're a homeowner. I see you competing in beauty pageants and winning statewide titles. If there was a contest for the most respected volunteer in town, you would win it. You would, you would Tina

And that has been very helpful to a lot of people in times of need, whether it's a disaster, like people suffer tragedy, the loss of a loved one and can't bury them, or burnout. People lose their homes or things like that. You're just always there. And not just during the holidays. I mean, just kind of the whole time. So where did that come from with you?

Tina Torres: Well, so I come from a very bad childhood and I was not loved on as a child. So I didn't know what hugs meant. And so growing up in that type of environment, I took on that same mentality of needing to be in domestic violence relationships. And so it just so happened that I was running from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to South Carolina, and went straight into Sister Care. Sister Care had an emergency program with Columbia Housing Authority at the time, where they would have 90 day assistance into one of their housing development. And it happened to be the one over there, Henley Homes. And so I moved into Henley Homes for 90 days, still not knowing what to do. And then they switched me to Gonzales Gardens.

So from the time that I was a child to the time I was in my twenties, I didn't even know what love meant as far as hugging. And so it wasn't until I learned about Habitat for Humanity from Gonzales Gardens, when they were teaching me how to put some of my money away for future to buy a house, it wasn't until then that I learned what community service was. And so once I learned what that was, and I saw people hugging on each other and doing all that, I was like, "Oh my God, I just want to know what that feels like." And the first time somebody hugged me without wanting something in return is when I learned that this was something that should have been happening my entire life.

And so from there, I just started getting more involved in community service and more involved in being there for people, knowing the ropes from DSS, knowing what it was like to stand in line for food at Harvest Hope, what it was like to stand in a line over at the Coliseum when they were giving out \$50 gift cards to shop at Kmart for each of your children. I knew what it was like to stand in line for the Salvation Army to get Christmas toys.

So it's not because I do with just to do it, I breathed it. I learned about it. I knew about it. I stood in the same exact shoes, living in a shelter. I've done that. So for me, that is why I give so freely because I know what that feels like, and I wouldn't want anyone to feel like that. So that's why I'm in these streets can consistently making sure that if somebody needs something, I fight to the top to the bottom and try to figure out how to get it. So that's why.

Cynthia Hardy: Tina, you used public housing as a steppingstone, which, from that perspective, that's interesting. Because of course, when they were designed, when these kinds of projects were designed by the federal government, they were intended to assist people who needed the assistance in that moment. Some people need it all the time. What was the difference between you and spending three years in Gonzales Gardens, and deciding that you wanted to be a homeowner? Was it the homeowner's program that you were able to get into because of the programs that Gonzales Gardens was doing? Or just, how did that go?

Tina Torres: Well, when I initially moved into the apartment complex, it wasn't so much like wanting to be a homeowner. At the time, it was so much trying to figure out how did that end up here. Not in a bad way, but in a fearful way. How do I make this work?

So I know that housing is supposed to be a stepping stone or a place where you are supposed to be able to live, but also seek so that you can still move, and be able to have better space, a yard, different things like that. I just had decided that for the girls and I, that I really wanted a difference in their lives. And I really wanted to be able to have a place to really call home. Gonzales Gardens was my home, however, I wanted to have a space where the girls could really be able to flourish and grow more.

So, I learned every program that I could at Gonzales Gardens. They always had some type of program that you could get involved in. So, when I learned about the housing program, about the program that would allow you to put money away if you're working, 20% of your earnings of your rent they would put away in a bank account. And I was really excited about that because I had never heard about that before. So, I started doing that. And then when the word came out more frequently about Habitat for Humanity, it was Gonzales Gardens that told me that you have enough money in your account to put your deposit down and pay the first month mortgage.

Cynthia Hardy: Wow.

Tina Torres: And if it hadn't been for that program, I would not have had the money to put down on a deposit. I wouldn't have had that. And so, for me, I went for it. Again, if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have known what to do. So, I would have missed out on owning a home because if I wasn't part of that program, I wouldn't have had the money.

Cynthia Hardy: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's such a powerful testament to people that are trying to figure it out. Powerful, powerful testimony. It's tough for people. It's tough for people to kind of untangle all the things that are happening in their lives and to figure out how to set themselves on a good path. And it's really a blessing when it makes itself plain, when it's revealed to us, and very relieving. And you haven't looked back. It doesn't look like you've looked back.

Cynthia Hardy: In fact, I see how your family has flourished. And by families, I mean, your daughters all have families now and they are doing well. And I know they're very proud of you and all your philanthropy that you do throughout the community, and especially your focus on domestic violence. Because I think it's important that people know that they have a safe space that they can go to talk about those kinds of things. Because I would imagine when you're in the middle of it, you can kind of feel kind of overwhelmed.

Tina Torres: Yes, it can be very overwhelming at times. But I look at the smiles and I look at what I know that I missed out on as a child and as a teen. And if I can help give a glimmer of hope to someone else, no matter where they're living at, I'm going for it, I'm going for it hard.

Cynthia Hardy: Well, you do go hard, you do. And you do for people, for other people, to make sure that they have what it is that they need. And that's commendable, really, really.

I've talked to some individuals whose families have been in public housing generationally, and for them that seemed to work. But as I listen to you and listen to your model, this worked for your family to be there for just a short period of time, to take advantage of the programs that were there and to take a little bit of everything that you learn now to kind of weave a very successful life for yourself.

And I think about what you mentioned in terms of the program you were in with Mrs. McKnight and how you learned typing skills. Well, who knew that we were headed to computers that our whole day would be spent on that keyboard? You know what I mean?

Tina Torres: Yes.

Cynthia Hardy: It's true. And to be able to hammer it out and not to be intimidated by it is a relief. Because some people have to kind of learn not to be intimidated in those kinds of settings. And it's looks like you've been able to get good employment over the years.

Tina Torres: Yes, I have. I mean, with Gonzales Gardens, they had the right people in place that really wanted to see people succeed. And so I always knew about the program or the newsletter that was always sent out to us. And I would always just jump on any and everything so that I could provide a better life for my children. I just wanted for them what I missed out on. And I wanted them to be able to live someplace where they had a yard, where they could have a dog, where they could just be free.

And Gonzales Gardens really helped me be able to provide that type of opportunity for my children. Without Gonzales Gardens, I would not have known about the Columbia Urban League, I would not have known about the Co Bond, I would not have known about the daycare, the programs. They're the ones that pushed me to find out more about the programs at DSS. They helped me find a car. They told me about the car program that was going on, that I didn't know about, that they helped me get.

So, I just took those three years and I made it a goal to say, for three years, you have a three-year goal. At the end of three years, you should be in position to get your home, or be in a position to get an apartment, or something that has ways of you being able to progress. And so it just so happened at the end of those three years, I received a house through Habitat for Humanity.

Cynthia Hardy: That's a great story. I mean, that's just awesome. So, is there anything that you want to add to this interview? I think it's been great for me to hear that you came into the situation in one way, but because of the support that you received at Gonzales Gardens through Columbia Housing Authority, you were able to put yourself on a trajectory that has made for a very successful life for you, for your children. And now it's hard for me to believe as beautiful and young as you are, grandchildren.

Tina Torres: Yeah, little five-year-old. I would say that if it hadn't been for Gonzales Gardens, me having to be... I was broken by the time I got to Gonzales Gardens. And if it hadn't been for that brokenness and growing through Gonzales Gardens and their programs, and their ability to help those that really wanted to be helped, if it hadn't been for them, I would not be in a Habitat for Humanity house, I would not have three high school graduates, I would not have two college graduates, one with a double degree. I wouldn't have had the good jobs that I've had. I wouldn't

have the community connections that I have. I wouldn't be in the beauty pageants that I'm in. And I wouldn't be the speaker advocate and business owner that I am today if it hadn't been for me having that brokenness and landing at the steps of Gonzales Gardens.

Cynthia Hardy: Well, Tina Torres, thank you for this interview. And thank you for your contribution to the oral history of Gonzales Gardens.

You are more than welcome.

Cynthia Hardy: All right. Bye-bye.

Bye-bye