

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DEBORA LA TORRE

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Debora La Torre on January 21, 2020, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Kate Rizzi. Thank you so much for coming in to do this oral history interview.

Debora La Torre: Thank you so much for having me.

KR: To begin, where and when were you born?

DL: I was born in Lima, Peru, July 14, 1982. The actual hospital escapes me, but, according to my mom, it was very interesting. I have stories from Mom and Dad. Apparently, at the time, medical coverage wasn't the greatest and that night I came out okay, but apparently when the resident was suturing my mother, she ended up leaving part of the placenta. So, my mom ended up almost being septic, which I did not know. They released me, but my mom had to still stay inside of the hospital for a couple days, and my dad was like nope, they leave together. My mom definitely weighs that on me often. [laughter] She's like, "You know, you were the one that almost scared me." I was like, "Oh, thank you."

I lived in Peru with my mother until the age of about three. My father immigrated here to the United States before us to "make a better life for us." We were born in Lima. We were poor. Definitely, we're better off now. It was called the ghetto portion of Lima, as they say, and the way that we grew up, it was one of those dangerous places where they call Lima the *Linda Vicki*, Pretty Victoria, a nickname of saying pretty much where five go in and only one comes out. That's the kind of region that we're talking about. It was very violent back then, but better off now, more commercialized. Definitely, one of the things that my mom and dad realized [was] that we really couldn't raise a family [there]. [Editor's Note: La Victoria is a district in the city of Lima, Peru.]

Both of my parents were pretty young. They are high school sweethearts. My dad was twenty-one when he had me. My mom was barely eighteen. So, both my parents graduated high school. They both worked in the family business. My dad, at twenty-one years old, and then having to support a family, he did round-about jobs. My mom helped out my grandmother when she was still there, working at the local market. It's very similar to almost like bodegas but outside stands. My mom would tell me, "Yes, we used to sell socks and undergarments," and my mom learned to "hustle" from a very early age. My mom has a lot of street smarts still to this day. Definitely, she knew that and she persisted with my father that, "Hey, we need to leave Peru in order to do the best for our family."

My dad ended up flying into the United States. My grandmother, on my mom's side, was already here. She was established. She was a cleaning lady in Newark. I believe she came in the early '80s, 1981-'82, around the year I was born, and then she petitioned for my father to come over, along with her other son, my uncle. They found my dad factory jobs to start saving up money, so he can petition for myself and my mom to come over. Around 1984, we came. There's actually a picture of me and my mom in the Miami Airport, I remember, pacifier and pigtails and all, just coming in. I don't recall that aspect, but I hear stories from my mom and dad, "Yes, you know, your dad was here for eight to ten months before bringing us over." So, it's nice that my dad was able to have a place for us. He was staying with my grandmother at the

time, and that's where we ended up staying for the first couple months of establishing ourselves in the country. My mom ended up working with my grandmother at a hotel/motel named the Abe Lincoln. She worked as a cleaning lady there for a couple of years.

I forgot what job my dad had at the time when we first came over, but we ended up getting enough money to establish ourselves in East Newark in a studio apartment. Most of the stuff that we had was given to us by the landlord because we didn't have much money. It was like a black-and-white TV with the dial up. It was a mattress, and it was a lot of little lend-over pots and pans and stuff, just to get us established. I have very, very vague memories of that studio apartment. I do have them, and my mom is surprised that I still have those memories. I remember there was a crib that I guess I slept in at three years old, and that's what they gave us. I remember, when I was little, I had to climb over the rail in order to use the bathroom and I was scared to use the bathroom at night because I remember turning on the lights and seeing roaches scattering around. It's a terrifying thing for a three-year-old [laughter], but it gave me a good idea of, looking back now, how poverty-stricken we were. I remember, sometimes just sitting down on a mattress, watching whatever we had in black and white with the antennas, and I remember, at times, my mom making sure I ate, even though she had very little to eat. I remember we didn't have many plates, so she saved and actually tried to clean off the Styrofoam plates, which is something not many people get to do or even hear about now. We lived in that studio apartment for a while, until my parents saved enough money, and we moved literally to the next block over, around the corner.

We got a legit apartment, and it was like a two-bedroom apartment. Then, my sister Susan was born in 1986. Just like any other sibling, I was a bit jealous because it's a brand-new baby, and I was [used to] being alone and so I was like, "Okay." My sister Susan and I get along great now. We vent to each other now about motherhood. Growing up in East Newark, it was definitely something that I had to [adjust to]. There wasn't a big Latino population. It was mostly Irish and Italian.

I remember growing up and going to the public school, and in kindergarten, I still didn't know English well because I spoke Spanish at home. I was placed in ESL [English as a second language] and it was fun. It was a fun class. An experience I recall was, we were learning about the circus, and I had no idea what she was talking about. She was just like, "You know, a circus." I'm like, "We've never been to a circus." The professor, I don't want to say pitied, but she wanted us to experience that, so she actually bought us tickets, for me and my dad, or a parent, to go to the circus. So, that was definitely the kindness of others and everything else made me realize that there are good people in the world. Just going through certain things with my siblings, I realized too [that I wanted to help people]. We'd go and get medical care, and our family pediatrician was Dr. Pons. Dr. Julia Pons is a pediatrician that practiced on Mt. Prospect in Newark, New Jersey, and just like babies get checkups and stuff, I realized, I'm like, "You know, that looks like something I want to do." As I was growing up, I realized that I wanted to help people, and I wanted to be able to be there for them. Due to these experiences, I realized that a career in medicine was something I wanted to do, and by the time I was ten years old, I knew, "All right, I'm going to be a pediatrician. I want to help the sick kids get better. This is what I want to do."

KR: I want to ask you a couple questions to follow up. When your parents were going through the transition of settling in Newark, I know your father was here first and your grandmother was here, what kind of community network of support was there?

DL: It was definitely Latino and family based. My grandmother had an upbringing more in the church, so we had a lot of church influences. My mom became a little bit more religious once we came here because it was pretty much, being so young at that time, Peru wasn't always granting visas and accepting them, and to be able to be both young parents and to be able to get granted [visas], she thanked her father, my grandfather, who passed away when I was very young, saying, "This is a blessing from God." We had a heavy church influence in the very beginning.

As we stayed here, more of our family started to come over. My grandmother petitioned for her sons to come over. By that time, I was maybe four, and my uncles had come over, along with their wives. Some of my cousins had not yet, so they got to stay with other grandparents there, and then they were asked to come over. We have a large family. Both my grandparents had at least seven kids on each side.

My grandmother, she was like our matriarch. I can't even imagine the kind of stuff she had to go through, in order to be the first one to come over and find a job. I remember her telling me stories of certain things, like, "You have to do your best here because no one really is going to give you anything. You have to work hard in order to get what you want." I was like, "Okay, Grandma." She definitely paved the way for all of us. She told us, "You have to get educated. You have to go to school. You have to do this," of course along with the other Latino cultural standbys of find a good husband, have a family, be a good mom. My grandmother, she had a first husband, divorced. Then, she had my aunt, my two other aunts, my mom and the one that followed her. She realized that at a very early age that she had to be available to support her family because, unfortunately, sometimes the significant other is not always there to do that. That's one thing I do pride myself on, both my grandmothers were that way. They had large families, but they worked hard for their families. They overcame a lot of obstacles in order to run their own little businesses and do what they needed to do. My grandmother too, before she passed, she still didn't speak English well. She knew the curse words unfortunately. [laughter] Like most cultures, they learned all the bad stuff first, but she knew that she wanted a better future for us, and that's why I think she pushed us even more.

We definitely had a very strong family bond and still do to this day. Out of all twenty first cousins that are here, we still make sure that we have a strong family presence. For Christmas, we made "Cous-mas," as they say. So, we all try to get together as best we can to celebrate that. After my grandmother passed away, we made sure that we were not going to lose that. Unfortunately, some of our parents don't get along anymore, but we made sure that we're not going to let that invade us because that's their own issues and own problems between them. We realized that we wanted, as a family, to stay strong. That's the kind of upbringing that [we had], that presence of family was always there.

KR: Thank you for sharing.

DL: Yes.

KR: East Newark has a Peruvian community.

DL: Now, they do, yes.

KR: Your family was on the forefront of the establishment of the community.

DL: Yes, it's really funny because there's a business in East Newark. It's like a bar-lounge, and my dad knows the owner because they grew up together in Peru. When we go there to have ceviche and other Peruvian cuisine, he's like an uncle to me. I forget his first name because I do call him "Tio." It's funny because when my boyfriend and I go there, he's like, "You act like you know them." I'm like, "We kind of do." It's a popular eatery, and I'll see my cousins or his friends in there, and they'll say, "Deb."

My sister Susan was more the embracer of getting to know my dad's friends and everything else, and still to this day, my sister Susan is very outgoing and has a great personality. She has always been this way, and it serves her well for her business. We still joke, to this day, that everyone in our town, in Kearny, when we moved to Kearny, knew her, and we nicknamed her the mayor of Kearny. It's very interesting because we would go trick-or-treating for Halloween in Kearny with my parents, and people would be like, "Susan!" I'm like, "We can't go a block without people knowing you." [laughter] We literally have to stop trick or treating, so she can say hello to some old acquaintances, friends, to catch up. I'm like, "We can't keep coming to Kearny like this." She's like, "It's not my fault." We all, myself and my sister Susan, worked at the local Shoprite. It's funny too because my sister does know Mayor Santos from Kearny. Because of that, she knows him. I'm like, "Are you giving Mayor Santos guidance?" She's like, "No, on the DL [down-low], on the DL." [laughter] [Editor's Note: Alberto G. Santos has served as mayor of Kearny, New Jersey since 2000.]

The East Newark Hispanic community definitely has grown a lot, and I try to show my daughter and my niece like, "Listen, this is where we used to live," show them and kind of realize where our roots pretty much came from and trying to tell them, "This one-way street wasn't here. There was a laundromat there. There was a bar there." It was one of those things that it's nice to know and see how that town has definitely developed and flourished more. I still go back there because I do know people there. Some portions of my family still live there. So, it's not like it's far that we've moved on from it, but there's a lot of influences now that sometimes I wish was available when we grew up. It's definitely more Peruvian driven and we're no longer "the minority" there, which is great because then other kids can see, like, hey, there's definitely a possibility to progress and get out of that area and become something greater.

KR: You talked about being in that ESL class in East Newark. What else do you remember about your early life in East Newark?

DL: East Newark, I remember it was me and maybe five or six other Hispanic children, that's about it. I was the second Peruvian person until like maybe sixth grade, when I finally left. There wasn't a big Hispanic influence there. I remember, in third grade, there was a question that

the teacher was asking, and the answer was telephone. I raised my hand, but I kept saying it in Spanish. She was just like, "What?" I'm like, "Teléfono, teléfono." I knew the answer, but I couldn't say it.

It was one of those things that growing up I kind of felt like I wanted to be like everyone else. My mom would try to make me a little leftover Peruvian food, but I didn't want to bring it. I wanted to be in Girl Scouts but couldn't be in Girl Scouts because my mom had no idea what Girl Scouts was. I remember living in East Newark wanting to eat mac and cheese like the rest of the other kids, and my mom's like, "What's that?" I told her. I remember begging my mom at the local ShopRite, "Just please get Kraft mac and cheese. I'll read the directions to you. I want to eat it. The kids have it for dinner and sometimes lunch." That sense of belonging and being part of that community was something that I really yearned for being a young child in East Newark. My mom burned mac and cheese, and I was like, "This is not how it tastes, Mom." After that, my mom was like, "I don't do mac and cheese." To this day, I make homemade mac and cheese, and my mom is like, "No." [laughter] I make good mac and cheese now. My niece and my daughter love it.

My mom, I remember PTA [parent-teacher association] meetings, I used to beg my mom to try to go. The kids for student of the month were being recognized at the PTA meeting, and I'm like, "Mom, we need to go, Mom. Mom, we need to go. We need to go." My mom finished cooking as quickly as she can. We have this thing called Sazón Goya. It has paprika and everything in it, so it leaves your hands stained when you season meat. I remember, one time, the PTA meeting, my mom was there, and they had us sit there and they were making the kids go into the classroom so they wouldn't disturb the meeting. I remember going back, and now that I look back, I feel badly leaving my mom there because she didn't really understand much English and she was just like, "Okay, I'll just sit here" because she didn't know what to do. [Editor's Note: Debora La Torre is crying as she speaks.] Now that I look back, I help out my mom a lot more, because I never want her to go through that kind of instance. That's pretty much it. I remember little things like that.

KR: I am struck by the really brave women in your family.

DL: That's one thing that me and my sister keep telling ourselves, because my sister and me, compared to the younger siblings that we have, they were more Americanized. My sister Michelle, she's a paralegal in Clifton. My sister, Brianna, she is going through Hudson Community College. She's very creative, a great artist, but by that time, our family was already established and we were already living in Kearny. My dad had just bought the house, our first home. So, it was a big step and they didn't really get to see the kind of stuff that we got to see, my sister Susan and I. In that way of upbringing, it made us stronger in that aspect. My sister Susan and I keep telling ourselves, we grew up the way that my mom worked in the morning shift. My dad worked the night shift. They barely got to see each other except for the weekend, and we used to go to our local Wendy's and eat. That was our treat for the weekend, "We're going to Wendy's for lunch." Seeing the hardships of everything, I remember living in East Newark and me and my sister used to share that bedroom and my dad trying to jiggy-rig it to make it a bunkbed with the help of my uncle and everything else. I look back and I look back at that apartment, I'm like, "How did we fit in there? How did we manage?" Of course, times have

changed. Wages and rent was cheaper back then. We had a great landlord who knew and supported us and also understood the hardships new immigrant families were facing at the time.

That neighborhood was really great because there was a bunch of local kids and we would go up and down [the street] and we'd play manhunt. We'd play dodgeball. We had a good group of kids, mixed. By the time I was in third, fourth grade, my sister was already starting to get into the local school. It was really nice, the group of kids that we had. My sister's still really close to a lot of them because they were more her friends and hence why she's the mayor. [laughter]

Myself and Susan definitely knew and realized the struggle my parents went through. That's kind of why we didn't want to burden our parents with a lot of financial issues because we knew how hard they worked. We knew all the sacrifices they had to give. We didn't take a first official family vacation until I was at least twelve, and we went to D.C. because my grandfather came [from] Peru to visit my aunt who was living there at the time. That was a big deal because we took the minivan down and we all went and I was just like, "Woo, we went on a family vacation." Of course, we [got] lost because it was the old folding maps. It was definitely fun. My sister, I was telling her earlier today, I remember those trips. She's like, "I don't like those trips. I'm so happy we have GPS now," because we would get lost right around Maryland. It was always such a hard thing. We'd visit my grandfather twice in that season while he was here, and we got lost both times, you know, typical Mom, Dad, argue, "You should've went this way. Why did you take this way? Now, we're in traffic."

KR: I too have gotten lost on the Beltway between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. in the days of maps. It was impossible to navigate.

DL: Yes, it is impossible. It's really funny now that I look back. It was one of those things that me and my sister Susan definitely had to go through, and I think it made us stronger for it. It's really one of those things that I look back and I also give out to a lot of nursing mentees that I do mentor. It's not just us. I feel like our culture is that way. They feel like the woman is so strong. I'm not saying the men aren't strong because they still have that cultural aspect that the male provides for family while the woman sustains it. It's definitely something that we, as a culture, I don't want to change, but I feel like we can improve because sometimes we take care of the family so much but we forget about ourselves in that aspect. It's definitely something that my sister Susan and I are realizing. We have to definitely help ourselves. We rely on family, but [we can't] always give up everything for our family because eventually our kids will grow up. Our kids will move on, but where are we in that aftermath?

I see it with my mom and my dad. After over twenty years of raising children, my mom and dad are starting to get to know each other again. They go to the local spot, order their dinner. My mom, after me begging her, has finally gotten a gym membership and is going and doing her Zumba with her friends because she finally has friends again rather than just the family. She realized the importance of having a friendship circle and having her friends. My dad too, he has his friends, but he's being a homebody now. He's being the old man on the couch watching soccer. It's definitely something that, culturally, I see that a lot of our parents are getting to know each other again after raising the family, and I feel and I hope that future generations realize that you can have that but still encompass the you and your spouse, you and your friends kind of

thing, and still have that. Don't lose that because I feel like we definitely need to stress that a little bit more as a culture.

KR: I am going to pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: Okay, we are back on.

DL: That's one thing that I do stress a lot with the nurses and Latinas in general, I do stress, especially when they feel like they can't make it, they feel like, "I don't know how I'm going to do this all," and I tell them, "Just remember whose blood runs through your veins." I see it culturally. Grandmothers, mothers are strong women. I'm like, "Don't forget, you have that drive. That passion is there. The power to do that is there. If our grandparents were able to do it with a lot less means, why can't we?" It's definitely having that community and knowing that, it's like wow.

I remember going through my master's, working full time, full time in school, still managing Army responsibilities, taking care of my daughter, yes, I had help from my parents and family, I needed it, but I look back now and I'm like, "How did I do that? I can't believe I did all that" and sacrifice a lot as a Latina woman. It definitely is something that I hate to say it's common within our culture, but definitely it's something that we have endured. I tell a lot of my friends too, "You are stronger than what you believe. Your family is there to help support, but you have to make this decision. You've got to make it happen."

KR: When you were growing up in East Newark and then Kearny, what Peruvian traditions were carried on in your family?

DL: Growing up, my mom was still somewhat religious. She's not anymore. We always had to attend Easter mass. That was a big thing. We always, as a family, had to. My father used to join us, but after his mom passed away, he really couldn't go to church, for his own personal sake. He goes now but mostly if there's any other family losses. But definitely Easter mass, that was non-negotiable. We had to dress up, the dress, everyone looks good for God kind of thing. Christmas Eve, we always opened presents at midnight. We still carry that tradition. It was mostly try to be there for family holidays. Our patron saint, he is called El Señor de los Milagros. There's a celebration in October, and we see them going through the streets, carrying El Señor throughout the streets and praising the saint. That's something that is definitely really big in our culture, and still to this day, I try to make it. It's hard with work now. My mom and dad try to go. It's almost like a reacquaintance with the religion and also seeing other family members who are there. Kearny has a big thing with the festival, and they go from Harrison all the way to Kearny. They usually have the local food--it's very similar to zeppoles, but it's actually dipped in a honey molasses versus the powdered sugar. They're called picarones. They're delicious. They're a guilty pleasure of mine, but it's little things like that. I'm trying to think of what other traditions that we do.



My mom, from a very young age, wanted to make sure that we could suffice and have motherly responsibilities. I was in charge of my sister Susan, and then, of course, when my sister Michelle was born, I had to take care of her. Mind you, I only have a ten-year difference between me and Michelle, so imagine a twelve-year-old taking care of a two-year-old. While my mom still had to work, I was expected to take out the meat to defrost, start making rice, by the time I was ten, in the rice cooker. I know how to do it even in a normal pot. The expectations of family and being the oldest was always there, and I feel like it's not just us. It was a Peruvian tradition because my cousins, the females, the older females, definitely, it was expected. I knew how to sew. My mom started me on the holes in my socks. I had to learn how to do that. My grandmother wanted me to learn how to knit, so to this day, I'm trailing with that, but I know how to knit. It was kind of like those responsibilities that you needed to take. The boy cousins in my family were not really left to fend for themselves, but they knew like, "Hey, you have to find a good woman that you want to have a family with. Don't be going out and messing around with any drugs. Don't be silly like that." It was expectations, but the leniency was more towards the males versus the females. I remember my cousin Marisela. She was a middle child, but as my cousin Cathy, her older sibling, was going to college, she was still expected to have the house clean, start making dinner, and all the while in high school while her younger brother was, "Hey, just do homework, play sports, do what you need to do, make sure that you get good grades." That was just expected from us. We knew, as a culture, we had to do it, and God forbid we didn't do it, because we'd get in trouble. We'd get either punished or something like no TV, no cable. At that time, phones were still not there, so we didn't get punished with that.

The Hispanic culture back then was still into the whole spankings and disciplining with a belt. I look back now, every time my mom hit me, I realize now as a mother, that's the culture that she came up from. I remember hearing stories from my parents saying that my grandmothers were far worse. It's funny because it's something that me and the cousins kind of talked about in "Cous-mas." If we were to strike our children or hit our children, would it really actually make them better? I feel, as a generation, we have learned that the violence is not necessary. I feel like as we're getting better in the generations, we're actually explaining to our children why we're disappointed, if we do have to hit them or spank them, why we're doing this, versus our parents didn't really explain that much. It was more like, "If I do this, I get hit or I get punished." It's just one of those things that our generation is getting better with that. We're teaching our children, like, "Hey, this is the reason why we're upset. This is the reason why you're punished. This is the reason why." I think it has made our children become better in that aspect. I mean, do I sometimes tug at my daughter's ear when she doesn't listen when I call her for the twentieth time? Yes, because I'm tired and I just want her to do the dishes. [laughter] But it's one of those things like, if it was like thirty years ago and if it was my mom, no, there was no ifs, ands or buts. You learn from trial and error back then. Now, especially in my family, I feel like we're explaining things to our children, so it doesn't happen and we don't have to punish them as often. Most of our children do realize and understand that. I know in my family we are getting better at and I feel like through the acculturation per the generations that are here, they're learning that as well because it's not just us. We're seeing family friends and they're like, "No, we do this, this is how we do it, and if they deserve a spanking, they deserve a spanking, but they know now why."

The last time I "spanked" my daughter, she was three because she wanted to throw a tantrum in a tub after I drained it and that can be dangerous. I was scared. I grabbed her in her towel, I

spanked her bottom, sent her to her room, put her on a timeout for three minutes, because at that time, it was like a minute per age, I believe, in the dark, and I felt terrible as a mother. I hear her screaming bloody murder and I'm like, "Three minutes, okay. I can do this. Three minutes." You do that, and after the three minutes were done--it's the longest three minutes, by the way--I went back and I explained to her, "Do you know why Mommy hit you? Do you know why Mommy left you in this state? Do you know why?" She was like, whimpering, "No, I don't know." I explained, "Because if you do that, you could get hurt." Then, we [established] the whole countdown thing, so she knew, after that, if I say, five, she may have related it to a spanking, but I've never really gotten to five ever again, so she knew. Some of my daughter's cousins are a little stubborn in learning that aspect, but they learned. That's why I feel like [this] brings up also a point of success because now they know, this is why I do certain things. It's a train of thought that's been definitely developed throughout the generations, which I like. We are getting better at that.

KR: When your family moved to Kearny, what was your neighborhood like?

DL: Kearny, at the time, was very diverse. It was definitely something that I welcomed. I moved to Kearny when I was in seventh grade. I was entering seventh grade. We had a great diversity at that time, and we had a mix from Middle East to Asian to South American to African American. To this day, I feel like Kearny does have a more Latino presence, but the diversity is still there. I actually did love growing up in Kearny. My best friend, she's from China, and we're still close. That diversity was more welcoming; it made it easier to speak out and present things because you knew that other people were either going to agree with you or that this is accepted. The acceptance was definitely there, and that's what I really loved about Kearny.

There was always a different festival going on. I remember when we were in high school, we started what we called the International Festival. Now, my younger siblings, who went to the high school at Kearny High, were like, "Oh, yes, we're doing that again." I'm like, "You do know that our class is the one that started all that." We did the powderpuff football thing, another activity my class started. We had such a great class. Well, most of our class is still pretty close on Facebook, and that diversity and being there for each other was there. It's always been there and it's great. We have professionals from all regions, working [at] Google to the local store owners. That's one of the things I really did love about Kearny and I still do because I feel like that diversity is still strong in there.

KR: You are the Class of 2000.

DL: I am Class of 2000, yes, the start of the millennium. Prince's "Party Like It's 1999" was really big, Y2K, all that good stuff, we were there. [Editor's Note: Y2K was the technological scare that computers would not successfully transition from the year 1999 to 2000. Most computers and systems were updated to manage the transition.] It's interesting because we see that development of the Internet. I remember showing my daughter on YouTube the AOL dial-up and she's like, "You had to listen to that sound?" [laughter] I'm like, "Yes, sometimes for a whole minute." She's like, "Oh, no." We were very fortunate to see that whole world develop and I think it definitely helped us out in the long run. The diversity was the best thing because we got to see what other people were doing, even across the country. You started to realize at

that age, when you talked to these people on AOL, in these little chat rooms--that's what they were called--[in] the chat rooms, someone from North Dakota, they're like, "Nope, I'm the only Latino here." What? We have huge diversity, and realizing how unique that diversity is was something that we learned because of technology. That was definitely something that, even to this day, it kind of astonishes me how diverse this region is compared to the other parts of the country.

KR: You have talked a little bit about messages in terms of what your family was teaching you. What messages were being sent to you when you were going through Kearny High School?

DL: Acceptance was a big thing. I think we also did the Erase Program, which is pretty much treating everyone equally. I forget what the acronym meant or stood for, but that's a big thing too. They definitely wanted us to bring out acceptance a lot because they knew there was a lot of new things. The LGBTQ community was still very hidden, even though I look back at some of my classmates, who may have been part of the community, it was accepted. Yes, each little clique had their own thing, but there wasn't hate towards a certain race or anything like that. I mean, yes, we had our little cliquey groups, but I feel like we still had the normal groups of high school. The nerds stuck with the nerds. The jocks stuck with the jocks, whether they were Hispanic, white, African American, Asian. The tennis team stuck with the tennis team. The bowling team stuck with the bowling team. That message was there. Education was big. We had our valedictorian, we all knew he was going to be amounting to great things. Another thing too was the fact that not smoking was starting to get big because they were disciplining those now that they saw smoking, especially during the study breaks or lunch, and they were not having it. So, that was a big thing too.

Education was the key. It was looked highly upon if you made honors society, so it was definitely something that was stressed upon a lot. The big thing was who got the biggest scholarships, and it may be because I was part of the nerd clique. We had a big thing too with soccer. Kearny is known as "Soccertown USA" and I don't think we won the championship in 2000, but we won it in 1999, the state's male high school championship. We have this dual feud with Harrison all the time because for a while it was alternating. Harrison won it one year. We won it the next. They won it the next year. So, it was a big thing and still something that we're very proud of. I used to be on the soccer team freshman and sophomore year. [To] my dad, [soccer] was a big thing. My mom was like, "Soccer definitely united us as a community," when they could go to the games or do that. When my daughter was young, we were living in Kearny. I put her in soccer because it was the right thing to do and she more ventured towards being the goalie. She loved being the goalie. She was a good goalie. When they're little, they get sick being out in that weather. I was crazy enough to do soccer and dance one year, after mostly my mother's persuasion, and her father was like, "One year won't hurt." I never did that again with soccer and dance because it was a lot, but my daughter found the love for dance. So, we let soccer go after that.

It's funny because I do see some of my classmates, their children are heavy into the soccer and I'm like, "Oh, you're with the Franchinos." I went to school with their brother. Still to this day, I know a good portion of the soccer community there, and it's amazing to me how a couple of them went and joined MLS [Major League Soccer] and played soccer in college. It was

definitely driven. Soccer was a big community, definitely better than our football team at the time. [laughter] Even the goalie for the 1999 state championship, I think he hosts a Spanish channel and he's a goalie coach.

As a class, we've done pretty well for ourselves and harnessed our niches, as they say. The big things were definitely the drive for education, soccer was a big thing, and just pretty much overall acceptance of each other. I forget who our principal was at the time, but they were not having any issues of hate or something like that going on. It was pretty good. I'm not going to lie, it was really great growing up in Kearny, and part of me wishes my daughter could experience that time and era, but I can't do that. [laughter]

KR: Tell me more about your soccer playing.

DL: Oh, gosh, I wasn't good. [laughter] I wasn't good at all. I played soccer with my best friend Lisa and we played freshman year. Sophomore year, I unfortunately got hurt. I pulled a groin muscle, and that was kind of the end of my soccer career unfortunately. But the love for the game is still there. When my daughter was trying to be goalie, I'd still play with her and I knew the aspects of the game. I knew how to direct her and my dad knows too, and it's something that brought me and my father close together. Still, every World Cup, we're there. It definitely unites us as a community, especially when Peru was at the World Cup this last one, something that had not happened since before I was born. It was definitely something that we were all amazed, and we're like, "We can do this." Soccer is definitely a big thing within our community, and it definitely brings us together. It gives us a reason to eat and drink. It's our version of baseball pretty much, yes. [Editor's Note: Peru competed in the 2018 FIFA World Cup but did not advance beyond the group stage.]

KR: When you were in high school, what other activities and extracurriculars did you do?

DL: I did track and field. I was the wrestling score girl for Kearny High. That's why I kind of learned who the wrestlers were. My best friend Lisa was actually a wrestler, being one of the only female wrestlers at the time. It was interesting. I supported my best friend like any other best friend would, but my best moment in remembering was seeing when she actually won, I loved it because it was definitely empowerment. She's a successful teacher now, but she looks back and it's definitely something of breaking the mold. I was with people that were very passionate about what they were doing. I made friends with people who wanted to be successful, who held education in a high regard, who wanted to become something greater than what we were at the time. That's, I think, sometimes a little scary for some people to realize, but I thought it was great because you realize you were accepted among your crowd and I'm like, "I want to do this. It sounds crazy, but I want to apply for this scholarship. Who knows? I can get it." We gave each other pointers. It was something our group of friends definitely did. Most of them were honors society and they participated in the plays and we were always there to support each other because it was something that we wanted to have each other succeed at. That's one thing that that whole class pretty much did. It wasn't just like, "Hey, So-and-So is going to try out for this." It was more like, "Hey, everyone's there trying out." Everyone's there cheering each other on. It was pretty nice.

KR: How big was your class size, roughly?

DL: I actually can't recall. That, I can't recall off the top of my head. I know at least a hundred. I want to say at least a hundred because I remember waiting and waiting to be called, but I think now that class size has definitely grown. The last time I was there for a graduation was for my younger sister Brianna, and I think they had 120 at least, maybe two hundred, I don't know. I could be totally overestimating that, but it's definitely interesting when I had to go back to see my sister graduate, going through the halls and just like reminiscing. It was definitely something like I can't believe how much we've accomplished since we've left these hallways. It's not just myself; it's most of my classmates and everything that we've done. I have a classmate who worked for *The New York Times*. I have a classmate who was on, not *Good Morning America*, as a makeup consultant because that's what she does. I was like, "Oh, that's so great." Our class overall was very successful in various aspects of life. We have always the stay-at-home moms who are wedding planners, having kids, doing all that, which is great. Unfortunately, we've had a couple classmates pass, we always kind of let each other know or be within the loop of each other and, "Hey, unfortunately, one of our classmates passed recently, and we saw on Facebook." We're like, "Okay, so here's the wake information," and we try to be there for each other still. Facebook has also helped us maintain that unity, which is really great. It's not just to peer and see what they're doing. I get some of my friends who are like, "Oh, my gosh, I can't believe your daughter is twelve now." I'm like, "Yes, I know." So, it's definitely much better than it was before technology, and it's nice. I feel like I still have that connection there to those in high school. One of my friends, he's a dentist now, and I was suffering issues from my TMJ [temporomandibular joint dysfunction]. I literally had him on the text, I'm like, "I need help." He's like, "You know what to do." I'm like, "Yes, I know, but I just want reassurance, thanks." We definitely help out each other, still to this day, so it's nice to have that unity still.

KR: As high school graduation was approaching, what were you thinking about for your future?

DL: At the time, I already knew, by sophomore year, I was going to join the military. I still had that endeavor of I want to be a pediatrician. My mom and dad cannot afford 40,000 dollars per year for medical school. I can't afford that. So, what are my options? At that time, I was looking at schools that I wanted to go. I wanted to go to Loyola University. At that time, I think it was ranked one of the best for medical students to attend as an undergrad. I had a plan. I'm like, "All right, I'll join the military, have them pay for school, and then I'll be a doctor." At the time, it's like 1998-'99, when I was thinking, I was pretty much, "All right, I'm going to join the military. This is what I'm going to do."

My mom and dad really didn't believe me. They were like, "She's going to change her mind. That's not what she's going to do." You know, "She's probably going to go to college or take a year off and then go to college." For me to ask my parents to pay for college was not an option. I didn't want to burden my family with those finances, especially with three younger siblings, with one of them literally being less than a year old. I was like, "There's no way my family can afford this." So, at that time, [I thought I would] join the military, I'll be all that I can be, because at that time there was no talk of war. The last war was the Gulf War, and me being young and naïve, I'm like, "Who would mess with us?" [Editor's Note: On August 2, 1990, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait. On August 8, U.S. forces began the

defense of Saudi Arabia, known as Operation Desert Shield. On January 17, 1991, the U.S. launched Operation Desert Storm, which was a U.S.-led air offensive against Iraq's air defenses and infrastructure. The ground war phase of the Gulf War lasted for one hundred hours, from February 24, when international coalition forces liberated Kuwait and invaded Iraq, until February 28, when a cease-fire was declared.]

I decided to go into the military. I talked to the recruiter and they made me take the ASVAB. I scored pretty well on that. I scored what I needed, and they made me do the initial entry. [Editor's Note: The Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) is a test used by all branches of the military to measure aptitude for new recruits, who must pass the test to be able to enlist.]

By junior year, I was pretty much contracted to go into the military. My dad was more of like jokingly [dealing with it]. That's when I know my dad is nervous or contemplating, because he jokes. He's the jokester in the family, and he definitely gets that through his father. My grandfather is the same way. He'll talk his nerves through the joke. The recruiter came to our house, and like, "Hey, because she's still seventeen, she can't sign the contract." I literally was sixteen and turned seventeen, and I was like, "I'm going in." I think it became more real for my mom, at that time, because she realized her baby was going to be leaving. I was the firstborn. My dad, with no fear, he signed the contract, "When can she leave?" jokingly. I was like, "Dad?" He's like, "One down, three to go." He was thinking the same thing I was, "She'll do her time. She'll come home. She'll go to school and all will be right with the world." My mom took it the hardest because I was her firstborn. To this day, I still get it from family, "Do you know how much your mom cried when you left? Do you know how much? I can't believe you did that." At that point, I knew I didn't want to stay in Kearny forever. I knew I wanted to see the world. I knew I wanted to do the Army thing and help out the mass majority, whether it [was] me [being] a pediatrician or something else. I ate the apple from the tree, as they say, when the military was like, "Go see the world. Get an education. Do this." I was like, "Why not?" I had, unfortunately, the misconception that they were going to pay for my medical degree too [because] a recruiter [said], "Yes, we'll pay for school. We'll pay for school."

KR: How much guidance were you getting about your options? For example, did the recruiter tell you about ROTC programs?

DL: At that time, I don't think it was really big for ROTC programs. I didn't hear about ROTC programs until after I was a year in. At that point, it was too late. [Editor's Note: ROTC stands for Reserve Officer Training Corps. ROTC is a college-based officer training program in which students get tuition assistance from the military and are commissioned as second lieutenants upon graduation.] But there was big talk of you being an enlisted soldier, "You'll be able to do this. You'll be able to go to college depending on your mission." It was more like, "If you're a good soldier, you're going to get the best benefits." Signing that first initial contract, sometimes there's bonuses. Depending on your job specifically, you were entitled sometimes to a certain bonus, depending what that physical year had. At that time, I had scored high on the ASVAB. I went to MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station] over at Fort Hamilton, New York. They made us do a mock PT [physical training] test, which I couldn't even do a push-up, which was very embarrassing. I'm like, "How am I going to make it?" They wanted to kind of show us this

is what to look forward to. This is the test that you're going to have to be doing twice a year at least. So, I was like, "All right, I have enough time to get into shape," and everything else. [Editor's Note: The Department of Defense operates sixty-five Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS) across the United States. The two MEPS locations that serve New Jersey are located at Fort Hamilton, New York, in Brooklyn, and Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey.]

When we were at MEPS, we discussed our options, like listen, "You scored well on the ASVAB. Here are your options. This is what you're looking into." I know I wanted to do something in the medical field. I asked them, I'm like, "What options do you have for me in the medical field?" They're like, "Well, you can be a combat medic." I'm like, "What does that mean?" It's like, "Oh, you'll be able to work in a hospital. You'll be able to work out in the field. You'll be, after AIT, which is Advanced Individual Training, that's after basic, you'll be trained to be an EMT." In the military, your scope is a little bit higher than what most aids are given because at times you're the only provider or medical personnel at that region or at that location or at that company. You have to be upmost proactive and also anticipate what could happen next and be ready to act and react if needed. Me, personally, I was like, "I'll work in a hospital. That's great." I was like, "All right." [Editor's Note: EMT means emergency medical technician. Every enlisted soldier must go through Advanced Individual Training, or AIT, after Basic Combat Training. AIT is a soldier's training in their Military Occupational Specialty, or MOS, the military term for job.]

At that time, they weren't giving out bonuses, but I had the luxury of choosing my place of duty, where I would go. They had Germany. They had New York, which is up by Fort Drum, which is not too far from the Canadian border, AKA, "The Tundra," as they say. I did not want to go there, but they're like, "Oh, you'll be close to home," and then I'm like, "No, I don't want that." They offered me Texas. They offered me Fort Jackson down in South Carolina, and then they offered me Hawaii. [I said, with] no hesitation, "Hawaii. Send me to paradise. Send me to a hospital there in Hawaii." They're like, "Are you sure?" "Yes." So, "You're going to work at Tripler," this pink hospital. They got me with the location, and I was like, "I could do my four years there, come home with a nice tan, and then go to medical school. That'd be great." That was my whole assumption. [Editor's Note: Established in 1907, Tripler Army Medical Center is a hospital and headquarters of Pacific Regional Medical Command. It is located at Fort Shafter on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. The building is pink.]

The thing is with the military, the location is guaranteed, but your actual job is not. It depends on the needs of the Army, just like it still is today, depending on what units need a combat medic. It depends on the units that you get to and what you'll be. Each unit is different. Each unit has its own separate mission. Some units will go to the field more than others. Some units are just mostly hospital-based. I was lucky to be stationed with the 58th MP [Military Police] Company, which is military police. Out of all the--there were maybe six "combat medics" who were there for the in-processing when we got to Hawaii--I was the only one chosen for the military police, while the other ones went to, what we call now, those big hospital units and it's mostly field hospital. It wasn't a hospital like Tripler. It was more like, "Hi, you're going to be out in the field for thirty days setting up a hospital, training, and then taking it down and doing inventory."

I was with the military police. Being with the military police, I was a combat medic for them. We had our own little aid station, and we were assigned a certain platoon or group of the company that we were going to be their medic. If they went to the field, I went with them. If they didn't and they're doing their patrols like regular policemen do, then we would sit back in the aid station updating medical records, making sure vaccines were done, doing sick call, which is more like urgent care, done in a very low level, and seeing if we needed to send them to the hospital, regular urgent care stuff, like, "Hey, I rolled my ankle." "Hey, I don't feel good. I have a tummy ache." Sometimes, we'll get some soldiers that didn't want to do physical fitness early in the morning. "Guess what, you're good to go. Go run the four miles in the morning."

I had great leadership, and I honestly couldn't ask for anything more than that. They realized my potential from very early on. I had an NCO, his name was Colin Rader, he was great. He was like a second dad to me. He made sure when [he was] getting to know the group of medics that he had, he wanted to make sure that he knew who his team was. He knew I wanted to aspire to be a pediatrician at the time and I wanted to do so much in the medical field. He was like, "Being a combat medic is not just for you. You need to be something better." He thought, "If you don't go to medical school, you could be a PA, physician assistant, or definitely a nurse. Combat medic is not right for you." He knew, "Yes, getting your feet wet here is great, but you are more than that." At first, I was like, "Yes, I'll go to college. I'll get some of my undergrads done," because as active duty, we're allowed tuition assistance to apply to certain colleges. Some of these colleges had contracts with the military on their bases and you can go and do classes after your duty day was done or even on the weekends, so you can get some credits and get some prerequisites done, which was great. But he definitely pushed me to the point that I was doing twelve credits a semester and still working in the military. I was pretty much in school on the weekends and doing school on certain days after my duty day, and if I had to be medical support for a range on a day [of] class, he actually switched out with me in order for me to go to class, which is something you're not guaranteed in the military. It's very mission-oriented. The fact that he did that sacrifice and was able to do that for me and ensure that I went to class and got the grades that I needed, he definitely is one of the many reasons why I was very successful in achieving that.

It's funny because I touch base with him from time to time, and when I, this is years ago, but when I left and then wanted to come back in the military as an officer, as a nurse, I asked for a recommendation from him. He had already become a physician assistant because he wanted to excel as well, but he wrote this beautiful recommendation. It brought me to tears. I literally could not believe the sense of potential he had in me until I read that letter and I was just like, "Wow." It made me very happy and almost proud to know that I was fulfilling what he expected of me. He was deployed a couple of times, and I think he's finally retired. Last time I spoke with him, he was contemplating it. Without his leadership, his guidance, there really wouldn't be an ability for me to really succeed as much as I did in the military.

KR: When you talk about going to classes, where were you going to school, for the record?

DL: I was going to school initially at Hawaii Pacific University. Honolulu Community College I did a lot, until I had to get deployed and had to take a break. That's where I did the bulk of my



prerequisites. I remember taking history on a Saturday morning from eight to twelve and then after that taking a two-hour break and then having to go to another campus to go and take my A&P [Anatomy and Physiology] class and then the lab after that. I was in class from eight AM until almost six PM on a Saturday, which was difficult for a nineteen-year-old in Hawaii to do. [laughter] I could've been like some of my peers and gone to the beach. I did, especially when we had breaks and everything, because the beach never closes, except for major holidays. I lucked out a lot because I had the ability to do so, compared to some other of my peers, who weren't as lucky. They were out in the field. Online options for classes wasn't as available as it is now. So, I was very fortunate to do that. I went to another couple colleges, which I didn't realize until I started doing stuff for my doctorate degree, while I was in Germany as well.

KR: I want to go back and ask you about basic training, but, first, just to clarify something you said earlier, you said you went to Fort Hamilton to MEPS.

DL: MEPS, the Military Entrance [Processing Station]. It's almost like an in-processing to see if you qualify medically, physically, mentally, first to become a soldier, and it's one of the things that they do to this day for soldier candidates. If they find something medically wrong, unfortunately MEPS is the one that says, "Yes," stamp, "unfortunately, you are not healthy or available to become a soldier at this point." They've been doing it for years. Fort Hamilton is still very active. I see the recruiting battalion is still there and I'm like, "I'm not there anymore." [laughter] The recruiters do a great job in screening those that they already know are not going to make it, but MEPS is kind of like the forefront. They make sure that administratively you're able to do it. That was one of the issues when I came up to MEPS. I was good to go, but the thing is, upon my application, [there was an issue]. My mom, after three weeks of holding out on the contract and not signing, she gave in and finally signed it. I gave her, unfortunately, an ultimatum, "If you don't sign, as soon as I turn eighteen, I'm signing regardless and then I'm leaving." She signed, tears and hands and all. Now, I look back, as a mom, I feel like I was really cruel. I was like, "I can't believe I did that to my mother." They submitted my application and everything for MEPS, and MEPS had mentioned, "Hey, your resident alien ID card, your green card," as they say, "has a picture of you when you were like three to four years old. That's not you." I'm like, "That's me. That cute kid is me." They wanted an update. That was one of the issues that we had to overcome, and MEPS is like, "You've got three weeks. If you don't fix it, you can't go." I was like, "No."

She made sure, and this was another recruiter, because the other one had left already because his time [was] up, but she took over my case. I remember, she's like, "We're going to do this." I don't remember what it was called but [it was in] downtown Newark where you go and get that processed. At six AM in the morning, we were on line for it to open at seven. She was like, "We're getting this done." I'm like, "Agreed, we're getting this done." After waiting on that long line, we finally got through, I think, at one in the afternoon. It was after lunch, I know that, and we finally got done. We ate some food. Then, the next day or the next available day that we were able to go, we went to MEPS, and then it was like, "All right, you're good to go." They scheduled my date for the end of that month, the end of July, because I was supposed to leave literally right before my youngest sister was born. My mom says, "It was an act of God that you at least got to stay to see your sister be born," and I was like, "Okay, Mom." So, that's my mom's

little thing. She thinks it's more like, "You weren't supposed to leave yet. You leave now." I'm like, "Okay."

Besides that, MEPS still is a great way to make sure all the T's are crossed, I's are dotted, before you become an actual member to the military. They review your contract, make sure there's nothing else that you want to change or anything else. When they're like, "Okay, you're literally less than twenty-four to forty-eight hours until leaving," they review everything. They check everything. What they do is they make you take the oath of the soldier, and you're there in a room full of other recruits and you're there giving the oath. It was definitely very interesting, because, looking back now, I wasn't a citizen at the time. I was taking upon to do this and I was like, "I can do this for four years. It's not a problem." It was definitely something like, "This is actually happening."

The next morning, bright and early, six AM, they took some to LaGuardia, some to JFK [John F. Kennedy International Airport], "Here's your orders, here's your packet, here's your ticket. This is what you need to do." Some of them went to Fort Jackson, because that's a popular basic training [spot]. Some other people went to Fort Leonard Wood, which is where I went. [Editor's Note: Fort Leonard Wood is an Army installation in Missouri. It is one of several basic combat training sites.]

It was interesting, the first forty-eight to seventy-two hours after arriving. They get you in a USO [United Service Organizations]. They feed you up. You do things and you stand by for the point of contact to take you to the base. They take a group of us down to the base, they see your orders, see where you need to go, as in units. Fort Leonard Wood has an in-processing for new recruits, and they let people know, "This is the time you need to go. This is what you need to have," kind of briefings all day for the first couple days. That's when most of the men get their heads shaved. Women had to get it cut, or they had to put it in a proper way to make sure it stays within military standards, all that stuff. They gave you a little card to act as an advance on your first paycheck to buy uniforms, to buy the stuff that you need, toiletries, all that stuff.

It was very interesting for me, because, at that time, I was a city girl. They had us do chores. For KP, kitchen detail, I remember, we were bringing out some of the racks and I saw a deer literally less than ten, fifteen feet away, and I'm like, "Oh, my gosh. There's a deer and it's not behind a cage." That's when some of the other recruits kind of laughed and scoffed at me. They're like, "Wow, you're really city." I'm like, "Yes." I'm still a city girl to this day, but I've seen hay now. I'm more open to the countryside, but I prefer the city. The city is definitely something that I prefer, but being out there, I realize how beautiful the stars are at night.

In basic training, most of the drill sergeants were male. There were some females that were there. I realized the females were definitely tougher than the males. I remember one drill sergeant. We were not even in basic training yet. This was just to see, "Hey, we need to see who stays for a remedial physical training." I was not going to stay for physical remedial. That's an extra three weeks at basic training I did not want to do, so I pushed myself and made sure I passed. But I remember, she was saying to us, she's like, "Do what you can to complete basic training. Try not to get hurt, but do what you can to get out of here." I forgot what year she said she went through basic training, but she was telling all the female recruits, "I left basic training

with a broken foot in order to get out of here. Do what you can to get out," and I did. Yes, the training was hard. It was definitely something that I had never gotten accustomed to, at that point. I was still hating running. I ran for track and field, but it was short distance, nothing compared to the four miles that they were trying to get us ready for.

It's definitely a nice little unity for those people who go through basic training as well, because your privileges for a lot of things were taken away. There was definitely no cell phones. The only ways to communicate with your family was by a pay phone, which you had to wait on line for twenty to thirty minutes to use, at that time. It's not like that now. They're allowed their cell phones, which I think is so not fair, but then, again, where are the pay phones now? I just remember it like, as a majority, they were like, "You have to be able to pass the physical fitness test. You have to be able to shoot because, remember, it doesn't matter what job you have after this, you are a soldier first." That's one thing that they definitely instill in you from A to B. You are a soldier. You are here and this is what you need to do and this is what you need to learn. They broke it down because basic training is broken down to three phases, where they take away all the privileges and they do what they call BRM, which is basic rifle marksmanship, and make sure that people are ready to pass the physical fitness test as well, and the last phase is when they start giving you privileges back.

One of the privileges that I felt was very difficult for me was to give up my sweets and desserts, because, at that time, it was like, "You guys can have Gatorade or cake once you're able to pass the physical fitness test." In one instance, I remember, we're all in the chow hall, a big cafeteria, and one individual wanted cake. I don't know if he didn't realize, but he literally went up there and grabbed the cake. We're maybe at least two-and-a-half weeks in. We're still kind of weary of everything else but enough to know maybe he shouldn't have done that. So, this individual unfortunately got the cake, and the drill sergeant made an example of him and said, "You know what? Private So-and-So feels like he's ready to eat cake." So, they're like, "No, we want you to enjoy, sit down, have a seat, enjoy your cake." They're like, "Does anyone else think that they want cake?" Some people were thinking about it. I knew better. I was like, "Nope." I don't want to get in trouble because I remember them specifically telling us no desserts, no sugar drinks, no nothing, until we're able to pass the physical fitness test. He ate his cake.

Then, after that, we had a formation after eating dinner, and this is like around five-thirty. It's like, "Private So-and-So feels like he's ready to take a physical fitness test. Let's see who else is ready to take a physical fitness test at this point." So, they made us do a physical fitness test at like six o'clock in the afternoon. He threw up that cake. At that time, each age group has a bracket and it was different with males and females. Males and females had different standards of course, and being eighteen, in order to pass my PT test, I had to do two miles under eighteen-thirty or before nineteen minutes. I know that for a fact. I had to do at least thirty-five push-ups, and I had to do at least fifty-something sit-ups, after dinner. I was like, "I am not doing that. I can't do that." Of course, that poor kid threw up his cake, but it was almost like, I guess not mass punishment, but a mass learning circumstance that people realize, "Listen, they're no joke and this is what we need to do."

The standards back then were definitely different because I do recall, when I first wanted to join the military, I wanted to be a tank driver because it was something different. It was like, "I want

to be a tank driver. I want to drive a tank." I remember the first individual recruiter, he kind of giggled and he was like, "No, really, what do you want to do?" I'm like, "I want to drive a tank." He's like, "You can't do that." I'm like, "Why?" He's like, "Unfortunately, you're a female. You can't do that. That's a combat arms job." I'm like, "Really?" He's like, "I can make you a mechanic." I'm like, "I don't want to be a mechanic." Then, I opted for the combat medic job. I remember that being one of the things that gratefully has changed now, females can be tank drivers, but I feel like I'm not twenty anymore, I can't do that.

KR: What was it like facing that realization, that, at that time, as a woman, you were tracked a certain way?

DL: Well, the thing is, at that time, I feel like I was still very naïve. I didn't really think much of it because, unfortunately, it's the military, fine. They say I can't do it, fine, I'll do what they tell me to. Now, I look back. If that was me, with what I've learned and what I know now, I think I would've been more upset. I would be like, "Well, why can't I?" I think, a couple years ago, it was a big hellabaloo when those females decided to go through Ranger School and stuff like that. I look back at that, I'm like, "It's about time." What has stopped us for so long? I'm very grateful that there are strong women in the military who are taking bigger roles and leadership and making those moves, so future generations of women can be seen as equals in that aspect. Who knows? Who's to say if my life would've been different if I became the tank driver? Who knows? We'll never know. [Editor's Note: In 2015, the U.S. military fully integrated women, opening up over 200,000 jobs that previously had been denied to women because they were in combat roles. That same year, Shaye Haver and Kristen Griest became the first women to complete Ranger School, a sixty-one-day tactics and leadership course in the U.S. Army.]

Basic training was something that's been very, very interesting. I mean, I look back and I was like, "Man, I was probably in the best shape of my life back then," because you didn't have the unnecessary carbs, the unnecessary juices. You did three square meals, and that's another thing too I realize. Basic training, I got more familiarization with American cuisine than I had. The mac and cheese was there, [laughter] definitely better than the Kraft that my mom had made. [There were] more vegetables, but it was more like the mixed vegetables that you scoop out of a can. Catfish, I never had catfish until I joined the military. There was a lot of things, you know, standard breakfast was bacon, eggs and little potatoes, the hash potatoes. It was just interesting because I'm like, "Wow, that's a lot of food they're giving us," three square meals.

I got introduced to MREs, which are Meals Ready-to-Eat. That was fun. I feel like all the meat kind of tasted like processed meat, but it is what it is. I mean, to this day, I don't eat those. I can't. I stopped doing that after a stint over in JRTC [Joint Readiness Training Center], which is a joint readiness training exercise down in Louisiana. After that, I was like, "I'm not having any more." [Editor's Note: Fort Polk, Louisiana is an Army installation that was established in 1941. A Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) is located on the post to train soldiers who are deploying in the near future.]

It's definitely very interesting with that. I learned a lot from American culture. I ended up meeting a lot of interesting people from throughout the country, and I realized they didn't have the diversity upbringing as I did. To them, boot camp was their diversity upbringing, and it was

definitely something I think I felt like, "Yes, I kind of am the minority here." But I did what I was told.

We did what we were supposed to do, and they definitely instilled discipline. They needed to. They needed to do a lot of things to make sure that we were ready. The basic rifle marksmanship that they had to do, and I give them a lot of credit, for a drill sergeant to teach someone who's never even held a weapon to fire it accurately takes a lot of patience and a lot of courage too because you never know when one person is doing the wrong thing and it could be something fatal. They definitely do an amazing job at what they do, and they take civilians and make them into soldiers. It takes a hardship on them, I know, but it's definitely something that that discipline, to this day, is still there.

There's times that I wake up, I can't wake up at seven or anything else, but mind you, if I go and I know it's a drill weekend or I know I have to go to a military base, that alarm sounds off at quarter to five, boom, I'm up. I'm ready, because I know I have to do it. There is no choice, but versus a normal school day and my normal civilian life, I'm like snooze, snooze, snooze. It astonishes me, and it's not just myself. It's other people who have said that, who have a certain demeanor once you put on the uniform. It's what it represents. It's a disciplined individual, master of their craft and a subject matter expert. It's what you do. It's a big, big responsibility, and I carry it greatly with a big honor definitely, every time I put that uniform on, especially the dress uniform. My last drill, they had inspections and everything, and I was just like, "I hope it fits," because you don't wear the dress uniform often and ours, as officers, I feel it's more professional wearing the skirt. Some don't. I prefer wearing the skirt. Wearing the skirt in January weather, thank God it was that nice weekend, but I was like, "Oh, man, it's going to be cold." [laughter]

As an officer now, I realize why the military traditions and standards exist, and it's so younger soldiers can see that example and definitely strive to become that leadership one day. I have what we call battle buddies, which are friends in arms. Some of them got out, but some of them stayed on active duty and were command sergeant majors, which is one of the highest ranks for enlisted personnel. They achieved so much in their military career and they have definitely inspired so many soldiers, and it's nice knowing that we can provide that guidance and mentorship to future generations in the military.

Now, it's funny because when I was a young private, I remember a higher-ranking enlisted officer, when I was stationed with the military police, he was an E-7, which was a sergeant first class, so it's a senior enlisted officer. We were doing a detail of getting something out of Conex for the supply room, so I'm like, "All right, I'll help out." He was just asking, trying to see who he was with, he was like, "How old are you, La Torre?" I said, "I'm nineteen." He's like, "What year were you born?" I'm like, "1982." "You know what I was doing in 1982?" I'm like, "What's that, Sergeant?" He said, "I was jumping out of airplanes. I was at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, taking my first jumps out." I was just like, "Wow," and I'm like, "I don't want to do that. I don't want to do that." [laughter] Definitely, it made me realize the kind of wealth of knowledge and experiences that were there, and from early on, being a private, I realized these senior officers and senior non-commissioned officers have a lot to really give us and it's good to see that a good portion of them still want to relay that information to future generations, which I

like. I hope to do the same to the subordinates that I have and my peers as well because I did pretty much seven years active duty as a combat medic. There is a camaraderie among soldiers, especially those who deploy, and you don't let that go. That is your second family because you do day in and out with them. I'm not sure if it's just because when I was enlisted, September 11th happened, I'm not sure, but I feel like I'm definitely closer with my military police family than most of my other "battle buddies" that I've had or developed throughout my military career. We legit fought for each other.

I remember September 11th, as crazy as it sounds, like it was yesterday. [Editor's Note: On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four planes and carried out suicide attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killing all of the passengers onboard the planes and over three thousand people on the ground. At 8:46 AM, hijackers crashed American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. At 9:03 AM, the South Tower of the World Trade Center was struck by United Airlines Flight 175. At 9:37 AM, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon. At 9:59 AM, the South Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed. At 10:07 AM, Flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania, after passengers attempted to regain control of the plane from the terrorists. At 10:28 AM, the North Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed.] The morning of, I remember waking up in my little dorm room, I had a dormmate, and my alarm sounded at five-thirty because we had to be formation no later than 6:05. I remember that, and my dormmate came in from, I think, the bathroom because it was a community bathroom. She was just like, "La Torre, get up." I'm like, "No." All I wanted to do was not have to run that day because it was a run day for PT. I remember that, "I don't want to run. I don't want to run. I don't want to run. Please let it rain in Hawaii, so I don't have to run." [laughter] She's like, "Did you see the news?" I'm like, "What?" I was like, "What are you talking about?" "No, the World Trade Center was bombed." I was like, "What?" Then, I was like, "What are you talking about?"

Then, I remember, I called my dad for some reason. I had my cell phone at that time. We finally had cellphones. Once we graduated basic and everything, we were at our units, we were able to have our stuff. I remember my dad asking me if I was okay, and I'm like, "I just woke up. What's wrong? What's going on?" He was just like, "Are they sending you here?" "What? For what?" I was still kind of like, "What are you talking about?" He was just like, "The World Trade Center is gone." I'm like, "What?"

I remember, in high school, me and my friend Lisa, we would end up taking the train to go Chinatown because we were big Sanrio fans, and we would take the train into World Trade every time. I know World Trade. I know it before anything, and I remember, we'd go and take the train. I remember the stores. I remember everything about that, certain smells. I know I didn't want to go to [inaudible] side because the homeless people were always there on that side, so, I mean, I remember it all. For my dad to tell me that the World Trade Center was gone, I just couldn't believe it, "There's no way. What are you talking about?" My dad's trying to explain to me. I'm trying to get ready for formation, and I'm like, "Dad, I've got to go. I'll call you later. I'll call you later. I don't know what's going on. I'm going to help to try to find out." He's like, "You let me know if they're sending you here." "Why would they send me there?" I still couldn't understand why would I go to New Jersey if something did go down. I couldn't understand that.

We had formation. I remember our first sergeant, which is the highest ranking enlisted for our company, he said that there was an attack on the World Trade Center in New York. I kind of was in awe, like, "What?" I couldn't believe it, "What?" He said some other things, and, to me, honestly, the rest was kind of like a blur, and I remember him saying, "We're going to get changed into uniforms. The base is locked down. It's Task Force Delta," which is pretty much locked down. There is no ins and outs. The military police were activated, and they had to man gates. I just remember [thinking], "This is surreal. This is not happening. I'm going to wake up at any moment. I know I am, right?" My NCO, Rader, he was still my leader at the time, and he was like, "I don't want you watching TV." I'm like, "What?" He's like, "This is what I need us as medics to do. We need to make sure our aid bags are good and set. This is what we need to do. Get ready in case they give an order and we have to move out." I'm like, "What are you talking about?" So, I was kind of in awe, and I remember just doing what he was just telling us to do.

That was day one of seven that we worked consistently. The military police manned the gates. They did their checks. They pulled sixteen to twenty-hour days, I remember, and the support for them, we had to make sure they were fed. We had to make sure that they had relief, that they were able to get the stuff that they needed for that, but I remember that night, I didn't get out of work until like nine o'clock at night. We were checking all our files, making sure our supplies were good. Anything he told me to do, I pretty much did. Me, my battle buddy, her last name was Haygood, she was like, "Can you believe this is happening? Is your family okay?" I'm like, "I'm going to call them," and the busy signal was just going and going and going and there was just nothing going on. I was just like, "I can't even reach my family." I didn't know the magnitude. I mean, I knew World Trade was gone. I knew at that time the Pentagon was hit. I knew that there was a plane going down. They had like a dayroom, which is a common area, and there was a big TV there. My NCO was like, "I don't want you to be there." I'm like, "Okay." He's like, "Is your family okay?" I'm like, "I think so. I have to try to get in touch with them again."

I finally did, and they were fine. I told my dad, and he's still, "Are you coming here?" I'm like, "No, Dad, I'm not coming there. Right now, we're just manning the base. We haven't received any orders or anything." He was like, "It's crazy over here." I'm like, "Is everyone from our family okay? Is everyone okay?" My dad told me, my sister Susan was okay. At that time, Brianna was in first grade. So, he's like, "Susan went to go get Brianna," because my mom and dad were trying to figure out how to get out of work. I remember my sister Brianna, she's like, "I don't remember much, but I just remember I was scared because the teachers looked scared." She said, "I remember Susan picking me up and she was crying, and that scared me more." I hear back of what my sisters were saying, because my sister was in high school. I had left [for basic training] right before she entered high school, and she was a sophomore. Kearny High has a new building and an old building. There was a little covered panel, a walkover, and in that walkover, you always saw the Twin Towers in the New York City skyline. It was beautiful. I remember my sister telling me, walking that walkway that morning was the scariest thing because all you saw was smoke, and, "It felt like it was coming toward us." She was like, "I'm out of here." My sister Susan definitely was affected by September 11th a lot, and when she tells me now, she's like, "You don't understand the smell and the smoke. You could smell it." She's

like, "I won't ever forget that smell." I was just happy that no one from my immediate family was affected, thank God. My sister Susan was telling me, there was a trip to the World Trade Center from the high school that day and I think they did lose a professor and some classmates. There's a memorial now for them in the stadium for the high school, and it's a nice memorial. It's amazing to me. It still it makes me laugh when my dad says, "I thought you were coming." Him saying, "If you were coming, I was going to make sure you had enough food or something," I'm like, "Thanks, Dad, I appreciate that." His joke and humor strike again.

At the end of the day, during September 11th, I remember, it was nine o'clock. I was exhausted [from] packing and reading charts and doing all the stuff that he wanted me to do, and my NCO was more like, "Hey, get some rest. We're going to do this again tomorrow." I'm like, "I don't want to do this again tomorrow." "We are doing this until they tell us *when*." I'm like, "When what?" He's like, "Until they tell us when." I didn't understand at that time what "when" was. I'm like, "All right."

We had formation again, full uniform, six AM. The military police were already doing their patrols and stuff. I was detailed to be with supply. But that morning, I remember going into the dayroom, and I saw what was going on in the news and I saw the fact that it was gone. I literally began to cry. I could not believe this. I have so many childhood memories. I remember the bookstore at the corner. It was all gone. Everything was gone. You hear about the stories of people jumping off and stuff, I'm like, "I didn't want to see that. I didn't want to see that." That day, we did what we needed to do. We drove and ran to the patrol points of where everyone was and we offered them food, coffee, and stuff because these military police were working day in and out. They had not stopped since the day before, some of them, and I was just like, "Wow, here I am complaining about having to do this again." I mean, it was definitely a big thing for all of us that day.

I remember, by the end of that day, I was like, "I need to see what happened. I need to see the footage. I need to see that." So, I was like Googling, well, not Googling at the time, but I was looking at the Internet, trying to see what was going on. You'd see the reports. You'd see the live feeds and you'd see all this stuff, and I just broke down and cried because I just couldn't believe it. I was just wishing, for the life of me, that it had been a nightmare, but it wasn't.

We worked for around seven days, just offering food, water, coffee to the military police until the task force level was brought down and people were allowed to go in and out of base a little bit more. After security, you have to do that. I remember one instance, we were dropping off food at this point. The Family Readiness Group, which is called the FRG, every military unit has one, when the family supports the military during issues and devastations and stuff like this. We were giving hotdogs to the MPs, something to bring up the morale during this episode. I remember one of the members of the FRG were like, "Hey, guys, we know you're working hard too. Let's give you something." There was a little kid, maybe around I want to say five or six, and he had a little brown paper bag and he's like, "This one's for you." I'm like, "For me?" I'm like, "Thank you," not knowing what he gave me. It was one of the little hot dogs, and he had a drawing that he did. I still have that drawing, and he literally wrote, "Thank you for protecting us." I was just like, "Wow." It really made me realize what a soldier was, when we realize what the uniform really stands for. It made me so proud. [Editor's Note: Debora La Torre is crying as



she is talking.] I was like, "Wow, so many people right now are looking toward us and realizing how safe they feel," and I couldn't believe that. I'm like, "Me, really?" It was definitely something that I still take a lot of pride with me because--sorry.

KR: No, it is okay.

DL: It's something that has always carried along with me throughout the years of my military career because it is what we stand for. There is a quote by, I think, [George] Orwell that still reads out to me too, "Men sleep peacefully in their beds because strong men or brave men are out there working." It's true that, for me, I feel like I actually lived through that quote. It's amazing to me that so many people in this country confide in us and, yes, we do a lot of work and we do a lot of things, but it's just like it's more of a--I don't even know how to say it--I feel like it's more of an honor more than anything. I can't imagine some other countries who have a mandatory military service. We live in a country that people volunteer to do this, myself included. It's definitely something I take a lot of pride in. It just felt very overwhelming at the time because I couldn't even believe this young man was looking for us protecting him. I feel like it was a huge responsibility at nineteen years old to take, because I honestly was like, "Me, really?" It wasn't just me; it was what we stood for. That's something that I feel a lot of soldiers during that era have, that pride, that, "Yes, we're here for you. We're here to protect you. We're here to uphold everything that makes us so great as a country." I'm sorry. I just need a two-minute break.

KR: Yes, sure, of course.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: Okay, we are back on and recording.

DL: Thank you. Yes, September 11th was definitely very memorable for me. After a couple of months of the country being on high alert, overall, there was a big unity. As for us, in my unit, we were definitely even more unified than what we were. Then, you hear talk of us deploying and what we need to do. Units in the military, there's always units that are ready to go within ninety days, within so many certain hours after the time. Those are the elite forces of course, like Delta, Special Forces, the Navy SEALs, all the G.I. Joe, American hero guys. They get to do a lot.

My unit, per se, was not in line to deploy until 2004, and they wanted to make sure that we were trained and readily able to do that. What they did for some of us is they made sure that training was sufficient and they made us go through a training readiness-like exercise. At that time, it was what they called JRTC, which is Joint Readiness Task Group or Corps [Center]. It's almost like a big thing of capture the flag but without the flags. They gave you simulation gear, a weapon to put on there, of course blanks, because we're not shooting with live ammo. They give you scenarios in order to play out and act as a unit. You are in country ABCD, this is your mission to establish this, to protect the hospital, to do this.

I remember going with my platoon, which is maybe a mix of thirty individuals. We all went for our rotation of this training. I was the only medic, and there was a communications specialist,

which was one of my best friends, Desiree, so I got to this exercise with one of my good friends, which was great. There was a couple female MPs that we stuck around because the females stuck together. They made sure that we slept in different bunks. Going to that training site, this is a thirty-day [activity]. At that time, the location, the military police had found the location. They did their basic maneuvers for security. I'm like, "Of course, I have to pee." I'm like, "I have to go bad and I'm not going to go in the Humvee for sure, especially with all this gear on." I asked one of the squad leaders, I'm like, "Hey, I have to use the latrine." "There is none." I'm like, "Okay." "You have to go into the wood line, take a battle buddy, so they can pull security in case," because in this training exercise, there was OPFOR [opposing force], which is the people playing the enemy, and if they zap you--it's very similar to a laser tag kind of thing--but if they zap you, you're dead. You have to go to the PEHA [Personnel and Equipment Holding Area] and go through you're dead kind of thing. I'm like, "Okay." (The PEHA is designated to hold individuals and equipment during the exercise until units ask for additional support. If soldiers "die" during the exercise, they are sent to this location to perform details and chores until they are put back in "play".) [Editor's Note: The High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV), or Humvee, is a four-wheel-drive tactical vehicle used by the military.]

The training was pretty realistic to that point, but I remember asking my friend, Desiree, I'm like, "Des, I have to pee." She's like, "Now?" I'm like, "Yes." They pulled security and they're like, "Just go in twenty feet into the wood line. Don't go any further. Don't get lost." The squad leader at that time was Staff Sergeant Stitt, a great non-commissioned officer, and he pretty much broke it down for the junior enlisted of what needed to happen and basic stuff like, "Hey, when you do go out, this is what you need to do. I'll be back in twenty minutes. If you're not back in twenty minutes, look for me, and these are the people who are going to look for you" kind of thing, very, very tactical and very good. He made sure that all junior soldiers knew what the plan was in case we do have to go to the bathroom or anything else because we were supposed to "reenact" scenarios of war. I remember going to the bathroom and I was just like, "I don't have any toilet paper. I don't have anything," while my friend Des kind of has her back towards me. At that point, you do kind of get a little paranoid. Every twig breaking, everything you think is OPFOR. I'm like, "This is great, some guy is watching me pee." I did what I had to do, what we call drip dry, which is probably let it sit there and just go, and I'm like, "All right, done, done." We went back. I remember having a conversation with her, and I was like, "Remind me to get toilet paper if we ever do this again." She's like, "What?" To this day, I always have a little roll of toilet paper on any exercise range or anything we go to because I'm like, "I don't want to drip dry again." [laughter] It was just little tidbits like that I needed to learn about.

This is a base. At that point, the area location, it had rained in Louisiana, full of mud. There was no hay. There was no porta johns. There was no real setup. So, we slept in the Humvee that first night, and the next day the support team came in once the area was secure to start setting up the tents to sleep in, in typical military fashion, places to sit, eat. They had given us MREs because there was no hot food available. I had my [share] of MREs, and to this day, I do not eat them ever since then because it's processed meat. Yes, it sustains you for the process, but it's around three thousand calories each meal. I was like, "I cannot have that." Some people say it makes you constipated. I'm like, "I do not want to have that issue out there with no porta john and no toilet paper." So, I was like, "Ah."

KR: Was this Fort Polk?

DL: Yes, Fort Polk, thank you. We did that, and while the exercise is going on, they set up finally a TOC [tactical operations center], which is where they did the little headquarters for our platoon and where we need to be, and down the road, the field hospital ended up being set up. It was a pretty good exercise. We didn't get attacked that night, but the following night we ended up getting attacked by the OPFOR. The key was to stay alive, of course. They had separated us in tents, female versus male. The laundry services didn't get there until I'd say five or seven [days in]. What we usually do is use the baby wipes to kind of maintain hygiene. I just was very happy I didn't have to deal with my period at the time because I would've hated it. Just maintaining cleanliness was kind of [difficult]. I remember, we had established our little headquarters, and this is now day four with no shower. I'm like, "I feel fine, my body, but my hair is now greasy and natty."

I was due to pull night coverage for the radio because someone has to man the radio at all times. I'm like, "I can do that." Of course, it being January, most of January, and leading into February, in Louisiana, it still got pretty cold. It was freezing to me, especially coming from Hawaii. They had the heaters there, and I just remember it is now two AM. I don't want to fall asleep because I'll get in trouble. What do I do? I had this smart idea of washing my hair. I wash my hair with the canteens of water that I had already because at that time, we already had the water buffalo and I had gotten a little thing of hand shampoo, like the Johnson & Johnson, and I'm like, "I am washing my hair tonight. It'll keep me awake. I mean, I have the hair dryer here. No one else is going to be awake at that time, and if there is someone, I'm like, 'Listen, I have to do some hygiene.'" I think that was the longest I've ever gone with not washing my hair. I did it, and I remember, I was drying my hair and I was just kind of rummaging it through, combing it with my hands and just dry, so I can put it back up in a bun, so I could be within regulation before anyone comes in.

As I'm doing that and it's almost dry, my platoon sergeant, which is higher than my staff sergeant, now it's almost like quarter to five, he comes in and he gives me this look and he's just like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "I am so sorry." That's all I said. I'm like, "I just had to wash my hair." [laughter] He was like, "You've done the checks with the radio?" I'm like, "Roger, Sergeant." He just shook his head and laughed. He's like, "Who does that?" I was just like, "I just needed to wash my hair, that's all I wanted to do." I didn't think it was going to get me in trouble or anything, but it was little things like that. I'm like, "I just wanted to wash my hair." I could wait another day or two to take a real shower in the little showers that they made, but I just wanted to wash my hair and be happy that I washed my hair. I forgot his last name, but he had daughters and I guess he saw me as one of the daughters and he was just like, "Just finish brushing your hair and hurry up." I was like, "Okay." [laughter] So, that was one of the things that I do remember from JRTC.

Another thing is playing OPFOR and everything else, it didn't become like a game, but it was starting to become like a game, especially after the briefings and stuff because you didn't really have to deal with the tragedies of actual people dying. Yes, I was their medic. I tended to the wounded and sick. I would have to go take the sick or the wounded who were "dead" to the

hospital, field hospital, and I gave a report to them and did that. The objective overall in JRTC is sometimes you get overrun as one of the training exercises, what happens if you were caught as a prisoner of war. I remember pretty much just tending to the sick, and doing what my job was, it got, my training was so, I don't want to say repetitive, but it was so instilled in me to the point that I didn't really have to think in order to do what I needed to do. I knew my priority patients. I knew who I needed to get to. I knew what I needed to do for them. At one point, during one of the exercises, they didn't have a vehicle. I looked, I'm like, "Is that Humvee operational? You can drive? Guess what, you're my medical vehicle now. I need to get my patients to the hospital now or they're going to die." I remember, we had some OPFOR who were "dead" and they observe and I wasn't there at the briefing because I was still playing the game, as they say in the hospital, but when they had their briefing, I remember my squad leader at the time, Staff Sergeant Stitt, he was like, "They were giving you praises left and right, La Torre." I'm like, "Really? Wow, okay." They were like, "You did your job." That, to me, I felt like, "Did you expect anything less?"

One thing they didn't like is that they really didn't think the medical personnel should have been firing or shooting, especially a .50-cal, which is a very high-[caliber] weapon. One of my former NCOs had instilled something in me. He's like, "Listen, if there's less bad guys, that's less people I have to heal up." If I'm protecting my patients and giving off fire, that's a portion of me protecting my patients, especially of eliminating the threat and ensuring safety. I had my morals of why I did what I did as a medic because I was protecting my patients. That's one of the things that they instill in you, even in advanced individual training or AIT. The patient never falls, and the patient, you do everything within your hands and means to save your patients. That is why they call us the "Doc." Doc is never going to leave you out and about. It was a good exercise overall to go through, and it was great to hear that I had somewhat approval from others, like, I'm a good medic. I'm a good doc and I'm doing the right thing, so that was pretty good.

KR: What was your medical training like? How were you trained in terms of triaging?

DL: Okay, in Fort Sam Houston, Texas, which is not too far from San Antonio, we are trained to be--now, it's called the Health Care Specialist, I think--we are trained to be as EMTs. You're a nationally-registered EMT, but the thing is you're also taught to learn wounds of war, as they say. [Editor's Note: Located in San Antonio, Texas, Fort Sam Houston has served as the Army's primary medical training facility since World War II. In 2010, it merged with Lackland Air Force Base and Randolph Air Force Base to form Joint Base San Antonio.]

One of the big things is you know there's going to be gunshot wounds. You know there's going to be blast wounds. You know there's going to be certain things, so they put it in a way that it becomes repetitive. First, they go through the book, the modules, the death by Power Point, as they say, and I'm like, "Oh, no." But you learn it, you do it and then you teach it, same thing with IV [intravenous] training. They taught us how to do IVs, large-bore IVs versus the small bore, when to give it, the initial signs of shock. Those are all warrior task drills that they do show in basic training as well, but the higher advanced you are, especially when you're a medic, the more you are able to do, especially depending on the direction of your medical director. So, we were aligned with a battalion aid station, and our assigned PA would say, "I feel you are good and I'm comfortable with you doing ..." So, our scope was technically a little higher than that of

a regular EMT. I remember them teaching us how to suture, how to do digital blocks, how to do certain things, how to recognize an open chest wound, how to treat it, enough to respect that golden hour and for them to make it to the hospital and for the hospital team to continue on in doing what they need to do. As I advanced through my military career, each duty station I learned more as a medic in order to if I was the only one and this is the injuries that I saw, how would I do that?

Another thing that the military does is, it's mostly for medical professionals, it's a training that you can volunteer for, or some units just send their medics because they have slots in it. It's the Expert Field Medical Badge and that's referred [to] as the best of the best of the medics. They take a lot of scenarios. They've changed it over the years, but when I went through, you had to be able to do a nine-line medevac. You were able to handle and assemble and disassemble your weapon within a certain timeframe. You had to be able to do an obstacle course with four patients, properly triage, treat, and get them ready to go by yourself with your little aid bag. You had to be able to do quality CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation]. I think they took that out now. You had to be able to carry your lifts, which can consist of a fireman, the piggyback, and all that stuff. You had to pass a written test. It's a two-week course. At the end of the two weeks, you have to do a twelve-mile ruck march in under three hours.

I tried to do it three times, I failed unfortunately, and I struck out. The closest I have ever gotten to it was my first time. I got all the way up to the written exam, and I failed by two questions. It was very heartbreaking, but then after that, I treat myself to a pedicure. I was like, "Listen, I deserve this." After two weeks out in the field and I remember carrying a 180-pound guy for the carries and they're like, "Your average soldier will weigh around this much with full gear or battle rattle," as they say. "You are expected to maintain this standard. If you're a doc, you're able to move your patients. You're able to do these certain things." So, it was very eye opening because everyone within the medical profession, in the Army specifically, and even some Air Force, can take the course or go for the badge. You had to be medical, like a prerequisite, in order to apply. So, you have doctors, surgeons, you have radiologists, I think I saw one time. I'm like, "Really?" [laughter] For them to do this stuff, it's a lot, especially if you're so used to, "All right, I'm in the hospital," and then to kind of learn all of this, it's definitely a hard thing to do. I remember one of the NCOs who was in our sister company. He was kind of one of the, not preceptors, but part of the staff and he had his [badge]. He's like, "This is the story of the haves versus the have-nots." He's like, "You want to be a have," he told me, "Especially if you want to be promoted into a senior non-commissioned officer position because they look at things like that." So, I was like, "Okay." I definitely tried my best. Even nowadays, if I really wanted to, I can go back and do that, but I feel like, "I'm not twenty anymore. I can't do that." I feel like I struck out. I really did. I mean, I would've loved to have had it, but I feel like it's a lot, it's definitely a lot.

KR: For the badge, did you go to Fort Sam Houston?

DL: No, in Hawaii. We were at Hawaii at this time. I'm sorry. This happened as division wanted more people with the combat badge, so it was kind of a tasking for the big medical groups or the battalion to initiate one and have that training. They opened it up while we were in Hawaii, and all the medical units were allowed to send certain people. Myself and, at that time,

my squad leader and someone else, we all tried for it, and myself and my other squad leader were able to go. When I failed out of the written test, he advanced and actually got his. So, we were all there supporting him, and I had a lot of good peers come from that too. It's been very interesting because I still think about that and I think, "Man, two questions. Man, I could've had it." Even to this day, as people look at it, and if you have the Expert Field Medical Badge, it's not something to shy away from. It's something that you're considered one of the best. I was like, "Okay." It was not in the cards, I say.

The training, they do a lot of training in the military, especially [for] our docs because they know what is on the line. Some of those soldiers who are in remote areas, they have a doc and that's it. These docs have to be able to have them survive until they can get to a forward surgical team or get to the next echelon of care. They do a lot within their means, and I'm very proud and happy that I can say that I come from that kind of background because not many nursing officers, let alone providers, can say that, yes, I've done what I've done and can say like, "I know what it's like to be a doc." You don't forget that. I remember little key things, even when I was going through my studies of being a nurse and even a nurse practitioner and even my days of working in the ER, when one of my ER docs is like, "I need cricoid pressure," I'm like, boom, there, done, do it. People are like, "How do you know how to do that?" It's instinct. As a medic, they gave us training, even how to intubate. Sometimes you have to, because you're the only one there if that's the case. Some people, when I was going to my undergrad or even my nursing school, they're like, "You know how to intubate?" I'm like, "Yes, I prefer Miller blade." [laughter] They're like, "How do you know?" Uncle Sam teaches us pretty well, to the point that we may not be able to practice what we do as we do in the States because each state is different, but if I was ever put in the position again to do certain things, especially under military guidance, I would do it in a heartbeat because I'm trained. I can honestly say I'm trained to do those things, yes. [Editor's Note: A Miller blade is a medical device that opens an airway to allow room to intubate.]

KR: Let us pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: Okay, so we are on and recording. When did you deploy to Afghanistan?

DL: I deployed with the 58th Military Police Company to Afghanistan in 2004. We had received orders. There's actually a funny thing that to build morale and stuff, we were always asking our platoon sergeant at that time, like, "Are we really deploying?" because you'd hear these stories, like, "Hey, hearsay." "Yes, we are deploying." It got pushed back, this, that. I'm like, "All right, fine." Once the training and everything else became more real, we started getting our equipment, that made that realization a little bit more real for us as junior soldiers. I just remember myself and one of my military battle buddies, her name escapes me, we used to, every time we saw each other and our platoon sergeant, we'd be like, "Are we really deploying?" We made it in a little phrase, we were literally at the hub in Hawaii before we flew out to go to Bangor, Maine, to be like, "Are we deploying?" He's like, "I think so." There was definitely humor leading up to the deployment. Even the day we landed in Afghanistan, we're like, "Are we deploying?" He's like, "I think so. I think we're here." "Oh, okay." So, leaving to go to

Afghanistan was pretty hard because it was the realization, like this is real. This is not a war game anymore. There's always the possibility that something bad can happen and we could possibly die and not come back.

I remember they gave us leave a couple months before, maybe up to six months before you actually left to go to Afghanistan. I spent the two weeks with my family, which was great. I didn't tell my mom I was leaving for Afghanistan until two days before I left New Jersey. She thought I was joking and, no, I told her the truth. Now, as a mother, I can see why my mom was so worried, and I felt terrible kind of putting her through that. My dad was more of like, "Just be safe. Do what you need to do. Get back." My sister Susan, at the time, she took the news pretty hard and she didn't tell me at the time, but she was pregnant with my niece. She was pretty young. She was a junior in high school. It felt almost like history repeating itself through my mother. She didn't tell me until I was in Afghanistan, which was great because I was livid.

Landing in Afghanistan, it was kind of like, "All right, this is what we're doing." We're setting up. We're seeing the unit we're replacing and we're kind of learning what their role is and everything else. We landed in Bagram Air Force Base. At that time, it was still kind of tent city. They hadn't built up the wood-like huts or the b-huts [barracks huts], as they called them. We were still in the flapping kind of tents, and there was a porta john right outside our door. I made sure I had the corner bunk because I'm like, "If I have to pee, I don't want to walk too far." That was interesting. I mean, it took us at least a good month to transition, make sure that all of our inventory that we had shipped over was properly there, everything we needed before we started taking over the roles of "the docs." Unfortunately, within that first month, yes, the base got attacked and they told us, you know, this is where we go to cover. There is a specific sound to that horn. That one doesn't trigger me as much, which is good. What sometimes gets to me is the Navy jets that do fly over. Those, there's a specific sound that kind of gets to me still. I look up and I'm like, "All right, not there anymore." While we were there, we were still kind of establishing ourselves, where we were going and doing in the unit. [Editor's Note: Bagram Air Base is the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan, located about thirty miles from Kabul, the capital.]

One of the things that unfortunately happened, the LMTV trucks [light medium tactical vehicle]-we were replacing a Reserve unit. We were trying to transport them because they were on their way home. They had done their time. They were on their way home. I was going to get in the vehicle, and then my section sergeant was like, "No, I actually need you to stay back. I need you to do this more admin stuff because I'm not going to be able to make the meeting. I need to do something else." One of my battle buddies and two of the other ones, they went on that convoy to go and take these Reservists back, so they could start out processing and, "We're going home, yay," pretty much where we wanted to be. What happened is, when they were doing the LMTV in Afghanistan, in that timeframe, they still had a lot of windy roads, and our supply driver at that time kind of undercompensated and unfortunately that LMTV rolled over. So, my medics, I call them my medics, but they had to deal with a mass cal [mass casualty] situation because unfortunately in the back of that LMTV, there was around twenty to twenty-three soldiers inside and there was a fatality from that incident.

I just remember, one of my friends, and I love her to death, she was one of the medics that was there and she was just telling me, she was like, "It felt like a warzone. It felt real." One of the male soldiers that we had, she was telling me, "He just froze, Deb. He froze." I'm like, "What do you mean he froze?" This is all afterwards, because we were kind of debriefing each other what happened, and she was like, "He froze, and I literally had to do what you're supposed to do." It's a realization, when she was like, "You heard everyone screaming and they called for doc because they knew that one of us would be there." I kind of felt regret because I'm like, "I should've been there. I should've been there to help. I should've been there to do that." Part of me hated the fact that I was going towards a leadership position, at that time, to becoming a sergeant, and it's one of those things that I've had to learn to live with, that it wasn't really my fault. It wasn't. I mean, there's nothing I could do. I wasn't there, but she was just telling me, she kind of expressed and implied that, "I wish you were there to kind of make sure that we were okay as medics." That was a really hard time because that happened within the first month of getting to Afghanistan.

Of course, our first sergeant got the company together and let it down what happened. That driver of that vehicle got sent back due to psych issues. It's hard to even think and consider because you think you know what you're doing. You think you know you're doing the right thing, and something unfortunately happens. Things can happen. The fact now I feel like it happened to a Reserve soldier, he wasn't even active duty. He was Reserve, and unfortunately, he had passed with a couple months left to go before heading home. That was one of the situations that made it feel more real. This is not a war game. This is real life, and people could die at any moment.

Our jobs as medics, we were assigned to certain different things. Some of us did rotations at the [48th] Combat Support Hospital at Bagram, which was led mostly from a Reserve unit. They did basic stuff before they transported over to Landstuhl [Germany]. They did everything within their means because they were still kind of incorporating from tent to an actual sturdy facility. So, we went on patrols with some of our MPs. They did day and night patrols throughout Kabul and other neighboring areas. Then, eventually, one of the taskings was for the military police to take over the PUC, which was the prisoner of urban terrain. [Editor's Note: PUC refers to "persons under control" or "people under custody" that were held in a detention center.] So, it was pretty much like a prison, in case anyone might be holding any insight for terrorists or any issues going on with possible terrorism, or the neighborhood naughty guys pretty much. As part of us being assigned to this company, we had to provide medical support, not only for our MPs, prisoners, the EPWs [enemy prisoners of war]--in case they got sick, we would have to render aid. We had a doc from the CSH [Combat Support Hospital, pronounced "cash"] who made sure that we were taking care of not only the MPs. We ran a sick call for the MPs and also for the prisoners, making sure that people were taken care of. We had several different rotations, which we would do for approximately three months at a time.

When it was my turn for the combat support hospital rotation, I got to really see what it was like to be in a combat support hospital. I wanted to know what a combat support hospital was like; if I transition with another unit in the longevity of my career, what am I getting myself into? I was like, "It's a good experience." I learned a lot, definitely learned a lot from the PAs there and the nurses. They ended up making me rotate between ICU and the other ICU, so I was helping out a



lot. We saw a lot of locals too because a lot of the locals would bring some of their kids. In Afghanistan, during that time, the way that they heated up their homes was by the old gas heaters. They used to have propane gas and they'd get that stuff there and they would heat up the house. Then, sometimes if it's too hot, the kids would go on the roof and sleep. That's how they did it, and of course we got to see a lot of broken bones and stuff because some of these kids would roll off the roof. It's an orthopedic's dream. We got to deal with a lot of kids in that time. Unfortunately, some of those kids, I guess, their responsibility was to make sure that the stove was always running.

There was a little girl that came in, and she actually made me decide, because at this time, I was still wanting to be a pediatrician, "I still want to be a pediatrician. It's what I'm going to do. I'm going to get out and go to medical school." She came in with second and third-degree burns [on] twenty or thirty percent of her body because of that instance, and part of the ER, her being a local, we treated her for shock and everything else and she was one of those patients that was going to be there for a while. I just remember helping the nurse debride her, and she was nine years old, nine years old. It kind of felt good in a way, knowing that she was holding my hand, and as much as she didn't want the pain, I was helping her. I was there holding her hand, I'm like, "We're going to do this for ten minutes," with the help of the interpreter, just let her know we're going to do this for ten minutes, we're going to give her a break, and she's a strong girl, she has done this before, encouraging her. It really opened my eyes a lot to the world of nursing and what it encompasses. The docs were always seeing patients, which was great, but I think that was one of the pivotal turning points, like, "I don't want to be a doc anymore. I want to be a nurse. I want to be that person at the bedside to help." Yes, that's pretty much the pivotal force of that.

I remember the next day or two, I called my family, letting them know, "Hey, we're here. We're in Afghanistan, yay," and me telling my dad, I'm like, "Dad, I don't want to be a doc anymore." He's like, "What?" I'm like, "Yes, I don't want to be a doctor anymore." He's like, "What happened?" I told my dad what happened, a briefer version. He was like, "So, what do you want to do now?" I'm like, "I want to be a nurse." He's like, "Oh, my God." I was like, "What, Dad?" "A nurse?" I'm like, "Yes, I want to be a nurse." "You had to go three thousand miles to find out you wanted to be a nurse." I'm like, "Yes, Dad." He was like, "You could've done that here." [laughter] Once again, my dad's jokes prevail. It's not like he was disappointed. I feel like he was like, "Now, you come to the realization you want to be a nurse?" I'm like, "Yes, now I want to be a nurse." So, since then, I kind of was looking, "What do I have to do to be a nurse?" It's a lot of things that we get to do. That was a big thing.

We did our rotations. Holidays were hard, but the unit gave you at least an option. They're like, "Hey, do you want to take a two-week break for your family, or do you want to do a four-day in Qatar as morale?" It was already, I want to say, July. We had gotten there in April, and I'm like everybody's going to try to go for Christmas. I'm not going to. If I go over Christmas, I'm not going to be able to come back, I know me, I'm not going to want to come back. I was like, "You know what? Just send me to Qatar. I'll take Qatar now and I'll take a four-day break." It was great. I got to do a lot and see a lot.

As we were waiting to leave Bagram, one of the things that happened--I feel like we waited hours. It was probably maybe two or three hours max that we were at the hub and waiting for the break, and I was there with some other soldiers, I want to say, at least fifty soldiers. The way to leave Afghanistan, since it's so mountainous, was through mostly Chinook. The Chinook is the big giant [helicopter]. It's the two rotors and it kind of lifts up and it [is] a big cargo [helicopter] that the military uses. [Editor's Note: The CH-47 Chinook is a twin-engine tandem rotor helicopter.]

As we're finally leaving, I'm like, "I'm finally leaving to go on my four-day pass. Yay, I get a break. I don't have to deal with Afghanistan for a little bit." Maybe ten to fifteen minutes after we're flying up, and all of a sudden, I see one of the pilots, and, mind you, we're on cargo nets as seats. I'm trying to drown out the noise with ear phones and whatever I have on my Walkman. I just remember him being at the window and just like that, the engines turn off, and we are falling down from the sky for maybe a good ten to fifteen seconds. I see him shoot a flare out. I hear some other girl on the other side puking her heart out. I feel my stomach up to my chest. I literally am like, "I'm never going to see my family again." The good thing about it is they turned the engines back on. It's actually one of the standard maneuvers to avoid any heat-seeking weapons, and I am very, very happy that they knew exactly what they were doing. I didn't know until we landed--apparently, there was a head honcho on the plane too. I didn't even know. She was saying they were targeting us to bring soldiers down, of course, and to this day, getting on any Army aircraft is a very hard thing for me. I didn't tell my family. I told my sister Susan eventually. My mom and dad, to this day, still don't know, because I think my mom would break down and cry, but I told my sister Susan. That was definitely one of the scariest moments of my life.

We landed in Qatar. I made sure I had a good time, [laughter] with respect to the culture and everything. It was great. Coming back was very hard for me because I remember emailing one or two of my friends who didn't end up on the deployment, and I told them too and they're like, "Oh, my God, Deb." I'm like, "Yes." That was very, very hard, but, wow, that is, to this day, one of my scariest moments of my life. I've never had anything remotely come close to that. I literally felt my stomach in my chest and feeling like I'm never going to see my family again. Just to hear those motors go back [on], I felt like it was almost like slow motion because I see the guy, mind you, he seemed like such a cowboy, now that I look back at it, he has his helmet on, he had his thing and he was just like [turns the switch], and to me it looked like it took ten seconds. I'm like, "What the hell is going on?" as I look around. It's dark out. As we were waiting, I didn't really realize what time it was. We probably didn't get to Qatar [until] ten or eleven o'clock at night anyway. I just remember someone over there was throwing up and just doing that. I didn't hear screaming. Believe it or not, I didn't hear screaming when we were falling from the air. I was just more feeling like I wanted to take a nice deep breath, and I couldn't.

When we landed, we all got debriefed. The head honcho was, I forgot her name, but it was a command sergeant major of one of the supply units, and she was like, "I can't believe they tried to shoot us down. That's what I heard." She kind of debriefed the group. She was like, "Listen, we were aimed for an attack. Don't tell anybody." I'm like, "All right, well, it's too late." Thank God nothing happened, but it's just something that this is what our pilots are trained for. This is

what they do. Thank goodness there wasn't any casualties or anything. When we left Qatar, we made sure we left really early in the morning, and we got back to Afghanistan pretty safe. Then, of course, some of my battle buddies were like, "How was it?" I was just like, "Scariest moment of my life, thank you." I can talk about it now without an issue.

Fast forwarding through when we had to leave Afghanistan as a group when we were deploying, we had to get back on the Chinook and I was just like, "I can't get back on there. I really can't." I told my NCO and I told my PA and I was just like, "I really can't." My PA understood, he gave me some valium to help make the transition a little bit easier, and I slept through most of that Chinook ride, which was good. We were doing our stuff that we needed to do and everything else. That's one of the reasons why me, personally, I could never volunteer to go back due to the fear. I'm like, "I was lucky once. I don't know if I'd be lucky again." [laughter]

In Afghanistan, we had some, not casualties, but we had people sent home. One of our MP trucks got hit by an IED [improvised explosive device] or the truck hit the IED. One of our battle buddies ended up losing his left foot. I wasn't on that one, but one of our medics literally tried to save him. He did his job. He's a successful lawyer now in Texas. He is so great. It kind of upset me in the fact that we recommended him for this high honor because, yes, he did an amazing job, and it got denied, per se, kind of like dubbed down. The word that we got from leadership higher up is because he did his job. I think we were trying to get him a Bronze Star. He's not awarded that because he did his job. To me, I feel like, really? So, it upset me in that aspect as a leader, and it kind of deterred my soldier too. He's like, "That's not stuff we do every day." Yes, the infantry medics may be able to do that, maybe doing it every so often and getting used to doing that, but we don't do that every day. We don't. It was hard too, because at that point, this is after July and we're heading towards August-September timeframe in Afghanistan, and I had been promoted to a sergeant and taking more of a leadership role as a medic. My subordinate, which was this soldier, almost blamed me in that aspect because he was like, "You didn't put it good enough and you didn't do that." It was hard to hear and I tell him, now I tell him through Facebook, I feel like he was the guy who was always testing me. He was my problem child and stuff like that, and I'm happy he was because he always asked questions and everything. It made him a great leader and a great lawyer now too. I'm not sure if it was because I was a female, or it was just because that's his mannerism. I never know, but he kind of blamed me, thinking that I didn't do the right writeup or anything. It's hard to tell people who you know deserve all these things and to show their appreciation for what they've done, and they get denied because of that. So, it got dubbed down to a MSM [Meritorious Service Medal] and he was like, "I'll take it and it is what it is." I'm like, "It is what it is. What can you do? At this point, there's nothing you can do. It's out of our hands."

It was a big thing that I realize now maybe staying enlisted was not for me and I was like, "If I'm going to be a nurse, I would like to be a nurse and be in the military," because I did want to stick with the whole cohesion and help out the military as best I can. But there was a lot of stuff. I mean, there's a lot of behind-the-door things that happened, and at any time of war, people lose their cool. It's expected. You try to do the best that you can, and sometimes higher doesn't agree or see that. It is what it is.

My whole thing is, yes, Afghanistan, it was interesting, definitely. I got to take care of a lot of EPWs too when I did my rotation. It's a big thing, EPW is enemy prisoner of war, but they had a whole mix of it. The military did great in the fact that they try to respect their culture. They made sure that they were fed according to their customs. I saw nothing but male prisoners. I didn't see females. They ranged from age fifteen all the way up to ninety. To me, I was astonished. You had some that were "linked" to very high-risk terrorist attacks and then some people that were there at the wrong place, wrong time. It was definitely something that I never knew I was going to be doing. They told us, "You may have to take care of some moves of prisoners of war," but I spent a good maybe four to six weeks going in and out of that PUC and like, "Okay, this is what we're doing. This is sick call." We got to do sutures, just like we trained. We had a guy who ended up being in one of the attacks. He ended up coming in after the hospital did a bowel resection kind of thing, and he had a colostomy bag. So, we had to take care of that because he doesn't know how to take care of it. We made sure we took care of it, and then eventually, he had to go back to get it redone. I'm like, "I don't know how to do colostomy bags and all that stuff." So, it's one of those things, you live and you learn. The doc was like, "Hey, we're teaching you all at once. This is how we're doing it." It was a good experience overall. I mean, they were treated fine.

The prisoners definitely saw the females as more approachable. They'd try to get over on us a lot more than the male medics for sure. That was a given, and it is what it is. It's just probably their customs, I'm not sure, but for those prisoners that were there, that's what they saw and they'd try to get some entertainment with us. They'll see me talking to an MP, and they're like, "Dr. La Torre, yes." I'm like, "No, it's not like that. I'm literally telling him I'm going to lunch. Relax." [laughter] They would try to entertain or pass the time. They would try to be like, "Hey, you guys hook up." "No, that's not the case." But they would never do that if it was another male medic.

At that time, Afghanistan had gotten finally a coffee shop and a Burger King, a mobile Burger King, which was weird. They finally got it. I'm like, "Yes, a Burger King, food." I remember going into my shift for nights at the PUC and me going and literally bringing in my little chai latte, and the prisoners, for some reason, were like, "Doctor La Torre." I'm like, "What? Why are they so happy?" They're like, "I don't know. I don't know why they're happy with you." [laughter]

After I did my stints with the PUC, then I had to go back on patrols and get integrated into that, I had an interpreter. It was interesting, I still have videos of when I recorded in my little digital camera. When we did patrols on some of these cities, it reminded me a lot of old version Peru in a way, just like the little huts that they had, the markets, and they would have fruit in one stand, they would have meat hanging from the little pivots and stuff like that to sell. Kabul is very city, very similar to what I expected Kabul to be. But when you go to these villages, I remember, when I came back, I was showing pictures to my mom and dad, and my mom and dad were like, "Oh, it looks like San Martín from Peru. That's equivalent."

One thing I noticed too is that some of my brothers in arms, they were almost criticizing the community and saying, "Don't they know better?" I'm like, "They don't because they don't have the luxuries we do." That was one of the things that irked me a little, because I'm like, "You

have a civilization who doesn't know any better because they don't have the means to know better." It made me relate to them a little bit more, which was good. For some reason, the interpreters and some of the local workers that were allowed to work on base, they thought I was Afghani because of the way I looked. So, I did try to pick up a lot on it, so that I wouldn't need the interpreter as much. Because I was embracing their language a little bit more and their culture, they thought I was one of them. I'm like, "No, no, I'm not." I'm still America. I'm still U.S. It was just a weird kind of thing.

The patrols were fun. The bathroom issue was always and is still an ongoing thing. I think we had to go to a meeting. The officer had to attend a meeting with a local, and we were there for four hours. I was just like, "I've really got to pee. That's not happening, oh, my gosh." I remember, one of the guys who was on the turret, he's like, "Go behind the second truck, pee, and do your thing," and I'm like, "I can't." I became gun shy, as they say, and I couldn't pee. You're there behind the two Humvee doors, trying to pee, and you're squatting down. I'm like, "Nothing is happening," and then you see some old Afghani local like, "Look, look, her butt's out." I'm like, "I can't pee. I can't pee." [laughter] So, yes, that was interesting, you get that. I remember, as soon as they were done with their meeting, I'm like, "We've got to leave and I've got to pee." I made sure I didn't drink as much water for the ride home, which is not good, but you have to make sure that you are able to do what you do. That was definitely an issue.

One thing that I was very happy to do in Afghanistan, before leaving I had put in my application to become a citizen because I was still in this whole [mind frame of] if I want to be an officer, I have to be a citizen. When I was in Hawaii, the application process was a little easier because I was in the military, but the processing time was still about the same. It took a little over a year to get it processed. When I was in Afghanistan, my first sergeant calls me and three other individuals in, and we're like, "What's going on? I didn't do anything. I am not in trouble." He briefed us, "The embassy in Italy that covers immigration for the U.S. knows that our applications were approved and they're having a big ceremony because apparently there's about eighteen to twenty of you guys that can be naturalized as U.S. citizens while you're out here." I was like, "What?" It was definitely very cool to do that and to say I became a citizen of the United States while I was deployed in Afghanistan. My certificate says Processing Center, Italy, because that was the nearest one, and they have an interview and everything else. I look back at the interview now, when you Google it, and you're like, "Man, I was very young and naïve." It was definitely a high point.

Some of my battle buddies that were in my unit, they were like, "This whole time you haven't been a citizen?" I'm like, "Nope." One of them, I forgot his first name, but he was kind of reminiscing about, "You pay taxes and everything else." I'm like, "Yes." He's like, "You're not even a citizen?" I'm like, "Yes." He started saying, "That's taxation without representation." I was like, "Okay, there, let's go back to history." He's all laughing. He's like, "No, that's not right." I'm like, "I totally agree, but it doesn't matter now. I'm a citizen. I can vote now." He was like, "I can't believe it." It was a realization for some of them to realize not all of us were able to have the same upbringing and be as fortunate enough to be a citizen.

Afghanistan definitely had its good points, had its scary points, some bad points too, but would I do it again? No, no, not at all. I tell this often, because right now, I'm a nurse practitioner for the

military and there's all these missions that are coming up because the need is so great for nurse practitioners in the military. They're like, "Ma'am, you can go to Kuwait for a year. Do you want to go?" I'm like, "Nope." "Are you sure? It'd be a great opportunity." I'm like, "I understand," but I tell them, I'm like, "I have something now that I didn't have then." They're like, "What's that, Ma'am?" I'm like, "I have my family. I have my daughter." One time, I went to the base with my daughter to finish up anything that I needed to do, and he approached me again and I was like, "No." I told my daughter, I'm like, "Lucy, am I allowed to go to Kuwait for a year?" "No." I'm like, "She's in charge, sorry." [laughter] We joke about that. It takes its toll on my family, the fact that I am in the military.

Even after Afghanistan and even after I got out for a couple of years, I married a military man. His name is Harold Steve Cardona, a great guy, now I can say, he's a great guy. He is the father of my daughter. He and I had very similar experiences growing up. He was raised by a single mother. He didn't actually graduate high school. He got his GED, and he wanted to join the military so he could have money to go to school in order to become a real estate [agent] or go into film production. That was his dream, which is great. He's a realtor now, but he's still in the military. He and I bonded very well after Afghanistan and after he had gone to Iraq for the year. After three or four months of knowing each other, we decided to get married. We "eloped" and nobody knew. My mom and dad didn't know until I was pregnant with my daughter that we had gotten married, and my cousin Marcy was very upset because she came and visited me in Hawaii before I deployed. She had a great time, and our next trip was supposed to be Italy. I got married and she was very upset because that meant I couldn't go to Italy with her and she was very upset about that.

Me and Harold, we related a lot after deployment, and we share similar experiences. It was very comforting to find someone that knew or related to the certain things that we did. We decided to get married. We had the grownup talks, like, "What happens if this doesn't work?" He wanted to become Special Forces and I was there helping him to train for it in that aspect. I was the good girlfriend. He did his ruck marches. He'd text me, "Hey, I'm here, I can't do anymore. Come pick me up." I did that, very supportive. To this day, I am very supportive because we have a good mutual understanding for our daughter. We were both young. I was, what, twenty-three when we met. He was twenty-one. He had just turned twenty-one. We were very young, but we knew we wanted to be together. He wanted to do Special Forces, and our plan was we'll get married.

At that time, I had to change my duty station because I already had been in Hawaii for too long after deployment with Afghanistan. We decided to get married, so we could stay together. He was going to go to North Carolina to try to go to the school for Special Forces. The first time he went, he didn't make it. The second time, he did, which it's a long, intensive course that they put them through. It was definitely something that if you are a spouse of Special Forces, you understand because it is another unity, another more specialized group. Those men do train very hard in what they do. It's definitely very interesting. Being married to him, you have to rely on yourself a lot. There was always talk that once he finished the course, he was going to deploy, and so I didn't even know if he was going to be there for the birth of our daughter. We didn't know. At that time, unfortunately, when we got married, the paperwork took a while, so we really couldn't be together until after I got out of the military.

I went to Germany, unknowing at first and then realizing that I was pregnant. Then, he was doing his course for Special Forces, so it was a lot for a new couple to endure, especially long distance and the changes and maturing separately. Eventually, he was finishing up his course. I decided to leave the military at the time for our daughter's sake. I was about, I want to say, four to five months pregnant, and my platoon sergeant at the time was like, "Are we staying in, or are we getting out?" He was of Hispanic origin as well. I think he was Puerto Rican. He was more upset that I was leaving, and I decided to leave because with his high probability of deploying and knowing that the unit that I was in now in Germany, they were kind of next on deck to go to Iraq, I was like, "I can't sacrifice my daughter not knowing who either of us is." So, I decided to get out. When people are like, "Oh, they're not going to deploy both of you at the same time, they wouldn't do that." I knew better because I've seen it happen. I've seen married couples get deployed, and both their children have to be with grandparents or other family members. That whole you're-a-soldier-first kind of thing always stood back there, and I was like, "My child deserves better than that. I need to get out."

The plan was, key word, the plan was, I get out, I get my degree, I go back in, and he gets out, and he gets his degree. That was the plan. It didn't work out that way. After I got out, he had just finished his course and the realization of being married to someone who was Special Forces became more real, knowing that he was going to be deployed the majority of the time and it was very scary. Me being in North Carolina and recently having our daughter, I really didn't have much support there. My family was not there. It was definitely a big thing for me, and I feel like I even got a little bit of postpartum depression on that end. At that time, everyone was deploying in Fort Bragg, everybody. The war on terrorism was very heavy. It was one of those things, I'm like, "I can't stay here and be able to function properly and go to school as a nurse in order to provide for my daughter." The support with the Special Forces wives was there, but I feel like sometimes they even became cliquey. I was like, "This is not where I want to be to raise my child." I told Harold that I wanted to go back home and he was, of course, upset, but it is what it is. Unfortunately, throughout the years, he deployed six or seven times, so even to this day, I remember having conversations with him saying he doesn't really remember Lucy when she was little at all. I was a good mom for my daughter. I decided to come back home. I lived with my parents, and after seven years of not living in their house, that was very, very interesting. My mom was still stern, "My house, my rules" kind of thing. At that time, they already knew I was married. That was interesting.

KR: I just want to check in about time.

DL: Oh.

KR: It is 2:08. We will end for today.

DL: Yes.

KR: I want to thank you so much for coming in and doing this interview.

DL: Thank you.

KR: We will meet again for a second session.

DL: Yes, definitely. Thank you.

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

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