

Southwest Folklife Alliance
Continuum: End of Life Cultural Project
Elena Díaz Bjorkquist
January 12, 2015

Elena Díaz Bjorkquist

Part I. Subject and Context

Project Description:

Gail Bornfield and I partnered on this project to video interview members from the women's writing collective, Sowing the Seeds about end of life issues and to collect their writing dealing with those issues in the form of poetry, essays, memoir, obituaries, and eulogies. Our goal was to condense the videos into a short film and the writings into an anthology.

Formats Used:

We interviewed seven Comadres of Sowing the Seeds, using a video camera and taking notes. Gail developed a list of questions, which we both agreed to, and I did the video-taping. As the interviews progressed other questions also came up because of the interviewees' responses. I also did online research about end of life issues and developed a board on Pinterest of articles, essays, and quotes related to end of life. Both of us made personal observations about the interviews, i.e. the interviewees and where the interviews were conducted.

Summary:

I was surprised by the willingness of most interviewees to share their personal feelings about the loss of loved ones. It was even more surprising to find that the two women we interviewed that I thought would have more insight into the topic, a hospice nurse and a ninety-six year old woman were the least willing to deal personally with the topic of death.

What intrigued me was that many of the women still grieved, although in various stages, even after many years had gone by since their loved one died.

During the first interview, I realized that we were stirring up sorrowful emotions that distressed them. I felt that we couldn't and shouldn't leave the interviewee in this state. The women were personal friends, my Comadres, so the interviews became conversational, rather than formal. I think this helped set the tone for subsequent interviews. Gail and I shared our experiences so the women didn't feel like we were prying. We also made sure that we didn't leave the women in an agitated state, but that they felt relief from having talked with us.

What I surmised proved true in all the interviews. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. The intensity and duration is different for every one and it is different with each death. The experiences of grief become part of the narrative of love for the one who died. "All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story or tell a story about them." ~ Isak Dinesen To this end, Gail and I have collected women's poems and stories.

Part II. Findings

Interview Questions:

1. Introduction – What is your name? Where are you from? How long have you lived in Tucson? How do you identify yourself ethnically?

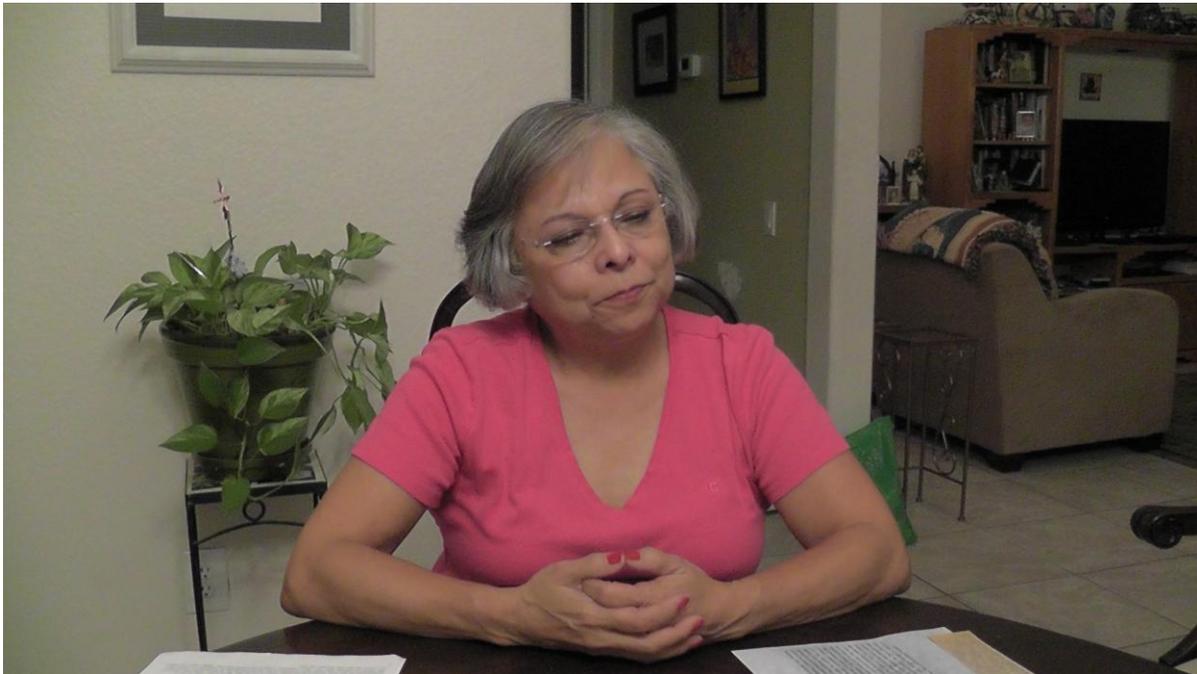
2. Short explanation of EOL Project
3. Have you experienced the death of someone close to you?
4. Tell us about that death.
5. Tell us about your experience with grief related to death.
6. Tell us how you think of the afterlife and what it holds for us.
7. What do you expect for yourself related to death?
8. Tell us about the rituals around death in your family traditions. (funeral, objects, religion)
9. What is the legacy that you want to leave behind?
10. How do you want to be remembered?

Informants' Perspectives



Rosalie Crowe, about family members grieving.

“You would think that in a time of grief, the family would come together, you love each other, and you’ve grown up together, you’ve been together through so much, you would automatically know that the other person is grieving. But every time, I’ve seen other people since I’ve become aware of it, that every time, the people you should trust most, you wind up mistrusting. You attribute the worst possible feelings to the people who are grieving just as much as you but in a different way.”



Geneva Escobedo, about how she keeps a positive attitude after so many family losses in her life.

“I think remembering the great times that we had together, because there were so many of them. I have so many photos of them that I’d taken when they were babies and little boys, and just remembering when they were two, and when we went camping, and those precious moments that we shared together. That stands out so much stronger than the fact that they’re gone; that we have this collection of happy memories of them. I’ve had a lot support with friends and family. For me, prayer is a big, big part of that; of healing, of helping me to move on and realizing that’s just part of what we all have to go through.”



Kaitlin Meadows, in response to how her work as a hospice nurse has affected her.

“It’s helped me considerably to have seen the passages of literally hundreds of people and to understand that people who are at peace and have settled their accounts and have come to some place with their soul work where they are able to release not only the negative things in their lives but able to step out some of the positive things in their relationships and pass on to the next stage of whatever that looks like for them.”



Nanette Longchamp, about the traumatic death of her five-year-old son.

“I guess I haven’t recovered from that loss, it’s been quite a while. He died 22 years ago. (Hesitates and takes a deep breath.) I’m trying to talk so I don’t get into that space. There’s a space as a mother, as a parent, you get into when you’re talking about losing your child. I’m trying to talk so that I can answer that question. It literally was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. It’s unparalleled, the tragedy. The pain was so physical for me, that I was debilitated for years. I performed, I was able to go to work, I was able to go to church, I was able to have this façade for society, but the inside was just decaying. There’s a feeling of the pain is so powerful, you feel like you’re hitting your body against a brick wall trying to make sense of the tragedy. Because he wasn’t sick, it happened so suddenly. . . he was hit by a car, so one minute you have the child and the next minute you’re burying the child.”



Joan Cox, 96 years old, about her thoughts of “after life.”

“My life has ended. I figure it’s over. I understand a lot about what people think and what I’ve read, what I’ve heard and stuff. As far as I’m concerned, my life is over; I’m dead. I’ve heard stories about people who have died and come back. They’ve been in a coma and they thought she was dead. I understand that’s a true thing that happens with people but I don’t expect anything like that. I lived quite a life. No, I don’t really (believe in the after life) but I got a lot of ghosts around here.”



Rosie Andrade, in response to having experienced death of someone close to her.

“Death and grieving are very personal and I’ve experienced death of different family members or friends that it’s very different depending on the type of death. By that I mean, is it a death relating to age, aging and the elderly, is it a death from the unforeseen, or is it a death from an extended illness or was it an unexpected death and was it a death of an act of violence. I think that also affects mourning. We all mourn differently and when you have multiple traumas as a result of death, it really changes your life in terms of life as you knew it ended and there’s a new starting point. It changes your perspective on everything and it changes you. You never return to the person you were before. Perhaps for me it’s a way of acknowledging that and moving forward. Being resilient. I also think that grieving is very different depending on the type of death and loss. I feel that certain types of losses are comforted by time and memory and other losses are not. The grieving is very different and perhaps it diminishes in its intensity but it stays with you.”

Part III. Supporting Materials

I've included informant's photographs next to quotes from their interviews. I'm in the process of compiling a short film, "Seeds of Remembrance: conversations with Comadres of Sowing the Seeds about loss and grief," that I'll post on YouTube when completed and will have it ready for our presentation to the community. Each of the interviews was an hour or more so it takes time to filter through and select the excerpts that will comprise the film.

We've gotten written work from Comadres, former Comadres, other women in Pima County and authors who've presented writing workshops for Sowing the Seeds in the past 15 years. The following are samples of written material that will go into the anthology entitled *Seeds of Remembrance: women write about loss and grief.*"

Poems

Learning to Speak

By Kaitlin Meadows

Does language wear out like hips,
Insight fail like eyesight?
When we are gone,
Does rain fill up our space?
Do the oak trees
Remember us
And the lilacs remark our absence?
Siblings a decade apart,
We never spoke at home,
Like two continents drifting
In our own separate seas,
Two refugees
Of different wars,
Separated by the ocean of years.
But we talk now
In the waiting room of the hospital,
Over cold coffee and stale cake,
About pain, loneliness, and loss,
Speaking the same language at last,
Realizing too late,
We always did.
"She cannot be dead,
I say,
Who will prune the roses,
Bake the birthday cakes,
Remember the names of all
My imaginary lovers?"

“She cannot be dead,
You say,
There are still golden jars
Of her marmalade in my cellar,
Handkerchiefs smelling of lavender,
Irons and folded
In her top dresser drawer,
Waiting to catch more tears.”
Together we agree,
She is with us now
More than she ever was,
Having taught us
At last
How to speak.

• • • • •

Justin: I Remember You When

By Geneva Maria Escobedo

I remember you when you and Jacob demonstrated
your karate kicks at your home in Solomonville, Arizona.

I remember you when you sang "Tomorrow" with that sweet,
innocent, perfect little voice.

I remember you when you painted the bulldog mascot on a sidewalk
at Safford High School your senior year. You were so proud of your
artistic talents. So was I.

I remember when you cooked a special dinner for me, your favorites,
cheese beans, green chili, and warm tortillas. I cherished sharing our
meals together the short time you lived with me.

I remember you when you gave me a floral bouquet on my birthday
and how you enjoyed the look of surprise on my face.

I remember you when you played with Benji and little Sammy at a
family gathering. How your eyes lit up when they couldn't stop
giggling.

I remember you when you called me "Nia" with such affection.
I felt like I was cuddled and appreciated.

The Lord took you from us too soon on September 15, 2007 when you were only 25.

I remember...

• • • • •

To the Women Before Us*

By Connie Spittler

Songs of life and songs of learning
Float like birds through autumn skies.
We hear your voices calling softly,
Whispered wisdom. Silver sighs.
Whispered wisdom. Silver sighs.
Gentle journeys, merging memories
Weaving words of silken light,
Telling all life's oldest secrets,
Moving thoughts, like clouds in flight.
Moving thoughts, like clouds in flight.
Like the wind winds through the branches,
Like the fish swirl through the streams,
Stay with us and tell your stories.
Live forever in our dreams.
Live forever in our dreams.

From the videotape, *Celebration of Age*, written and produced by Connie Spittler. Previously published in *Our Spirit, Our Reality: celebrating our stories*, Wheatmark, 2012.

• • • • •

An Elegy for a Beloved Friend

By Elena Díaz Bjorkquist

When I think of you, dear Dena, I see
 mother, caregiver, woman warrior.
I called you Dena even though you
 signed your sweet notes, "Mama Dena."

You were my friend. I didn't see
 the years separating us.
You were a person, a strong woman I admired,
 respected, loved, whose company I enjoyed.
You told me jokes, made me laugh
 especially when you forgot the punch line.

On our visits, you

read my tarot cards.
I shuffled the well-worn deck,
you dealt them into piles.
We'd sit serious at the beginning,
wind up laughing at the end.

Today I learned I'd lost you.

Although we didn't see each other
often enough, I grieve your loss.
The world is dimmer
without your light.

I miss you already, my dear friend.

May 26, 2012

• • • • •

Growing into Life

By Rosalie Robles Crowe

I was born bones,
Have always been bones.
But I am bare bones no more.

From the time I was born
I was shaped, molded and formed
Into the person I became,

Aware of what was expected of me,
How I should act and think,
Marching toward my future.

Mine were strong bones.
Bones that found joy
And contentment in the destiny
Created for the person I was.

But death stripped that life away
Leaving my bones exposed, alone,
Facing an abyss.

Death led me into layers of grief
Away from my world of "shoulds",
All couched in correct colors and rhythms,

Into “being” with the colors my bones now crave.

Colors and new light to clothe my bones
With new sight, new laughter,
New ways to look at memories.

I am discovering a new life for my bones to revel in.

• • • • •

All Things Shall Pass

By Rosi Andrade

Stoicism stands alone
Weathered by time and circumstance
Not lonely
Circumspect
Yielding to anticipation
A calculated emotion
A glimmer
Of the eternal
All things shall pass
We, you, I.

Previously published in *Our Spirit, Our Reality: celebrating our stories*, Wheatmark, 2012.

• • • • •

Parked

By Elena Díaz Björkquist

“Parked call for Dr. Handley,
Line 623.”
the operator’s robotic voice
resounds,
a counterpoint to Daddy’s
labored breathing.
“Parked call for...
Parked call for...”
My brain numb, I focus on
Parked—
Parked?
Parked like Daddy—
parked
in a hospital bed
parked

between life and death.
Each breath
a struggle,
slow,
slow,
short breaths.
Punctuated by
parked breath,
a gasp,
an inhale,
an exhale,
a rattling breath.
Maybe his last?
Parked like me.
Parked in this chair
next to his bed.
Parked, waiting,
waiting.
Our lives parked,
no other world,
no other time
exists.
Just Daddy and me
parked,
parked in this
sunny yellow room.
*Parked call for God,
Room 111.*

Previously published in *Our Spirit, Our Reality: celebrating our stories*, Wheatmark, 2012.

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

Día de los Muertos

By Andrea Hernandez Holm

Earth shifts ever so slightly
and the moon pulls herself closer
in her yearning to embrace us in her light.
The veil between the living and the dead
is caught in the gusts of her sweet breath
and flutters
and pulses
like gentle strokes
of a lover's hand.
Los muertos are drawn
by the movements.

Eager to touch bone to flesh
and dance among the living,
they bob on the breezes
between sky and earth
watching
waiting for us to welcome them home.

Previously published in *Our Spirit, Our Reality: celebrating our stories*, Wheatmark, 2012.

• • • • •

Eulogies

EULOGY FOR NATIVIDAD DÍAZ HERRERA

Daughter of Teresa Limón Díaz, granddaughter of Josefa Cruz Limón, my mother, Natividad Díaz Herrera was born in El Paso, Texas on December 24th, 1921. She always told us that she was responsible for the rest of her sisters being born in this country. The family was on its way back to México because PD had closed the mine and was sending workers back to México. The family never got there because of my mother's birth. She was the only one in her family who was not born in Morenci and although she made sure people knew she was born in Texas, she was very proud to be a "Morenci girl."

When I asked family members to describe my mother, they used many of the same terms: a private person, very shy, meek, humble, a caregiver, religious, loving, simple tastes, stubborn, intelligent, unassuming, frugal, timid, serious, modest, always put others ahead of herself, and most of all, she did not like being in the limelight.

For their fiftieth wedding anniversary, Mama didn't want us to make a big fiesta. We finally got her to agree to a simple renewal of their vows with only the immediate family present. For her eightieth birthday, we planned a big party with all the extended family invited. Again, she nixed the idea and we finally got her to agree to a small celebration with only her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The party was planned for last Saturday when everyone could come from California, Nevada, and Texas. When I talked to her on her birthday, she told me, "Can we cancel the party? I feel too weak." I told her I would not cancel it but postpone it until she felt better. Today we are all here to celebrate my mother's 80 years of life. It's not the party we had planned for, and there are many more people than my mother would have been comfortable with, but we're all here to honor her memory. I know, Mama that you didn't like to be in the limelight but today, like it or not, the spotlight is on you.

My mother was the fifth child of Teresa and Wenseslado Díaz. That put her in the middle of a family of ten children, nine of which survived to adulthood. Maybe being in the middle of such a large family accounted for her demeanor but I think it was also part of her nature. When I asked my mother if I could interview her for an oral history project I was working on through the Arizona Humanities Council, I was astounded when she agreed. I explained that the interview and photos would be on the Internet and people all over the world would be able to read her life story. She still agreed to do it. This shy, unassuming woman, gave us a gift the rest of her family and I will treasure always. She shared her life with us, not because it would place her in the

spotlight, but because she wanted us to know who she was. We spent an enjoyable afternoon together to do the interview. At first she was timid only answering the questions sparingly but as she became more comfortable, she forgot the tape recorder and told me the story of her life, a life that was intertwined with the town of Morenci. Knowing her story brought us closer together as mother and daughter and allowed me to better understand my mother.

Mama went to school in Morenci from kindergarten to 12th grade. She still remembered the names of all of her teachers and she listed all of the students in her graduating class, alphabetically. She stated in her interview: “I was smart that’s why I was changed from first low to first high.” This meant she had skipped a grade and was in classes later with students two or three years older than she. Her sisters, Josie and Licha remember that Nati was the one who handled the family business, kept track of their finances, translated for them, and went with them to get dresses and shoes during the Depression. One of them told me she had “a sharp brain,” the other said she was “very intelligent.” Both expressed the utmost admiration for their older sister. Mama was proud of the fact that she graduated from high school. For the past six months she had been searching for her diploma. Every time we spoke on the phone she would ask, “Are you sure I didn’t give you my diploma when I gave you yours?” I finally asked her, “Why do you need it? We know you graduated from high school.” She answered, “Yes, but my grandchildren and great-grandchildren don’t know that. I don’t want them to think their grandma was a dummy.” She was overjoyed when she found the diploma last month.

Because of her interview, I learned that my mother had a lot of fun as a child and as a teenager. All my life I’ve thought of her as a serious and cautious person so this side of her was a new revelation. When they were kids, her sister Josie would think of something crazy to do and my mother would caution her about the dangers but then she would go ahead and do it along with Josie, and their cousins, Lina and Pepita. My mother was the one that always wound up getting hurt. Maybe that is why when she was raising me, she kept me on a tight rein. She remembered that one time they all crawled through a pipe to spy on a meeting in the church basement. She cut her shin so badly she got an infection that kept her out of school for a month.

She never worked outside her home after she married. In her interview, Mama said to me, “I prefer being a housewife, to have somebody take care of me. I could have worked if I had wanted to because I think I was smarter than some of the girls that went to work at the store. I don’t regret not having worked.” She may not have worked outside her home, but in her roles as wife, mother, and housekeeper, Mama excelled. Mama and Daddy balanced each other perfectly. He is talkative, outgoing, and very social. She was shy, unassuming, and private. He earned the money; she managed it. She wrote out the checks to pay the bills, figured out the income tax each year, and saved money.

Mama was a caring person. If someone moved to our neighborhood on AC Hill and didn’t have a job yet, she’d get Daddy to help the man find one at PD. She’d collect clothes from our family and her sisters and take them to the destitute family along with food. Part of that had to do with her being religious but it was also her nature to be a caring and giving person. When my husband, our children, grandchildren, friends, or even my friends’ family members were sick, I would call my mother and ask her to pray for them and put their name on the church’s prayer list so others could also pray for them. She believed strongly in the power of prayer and I saw the effects of it so many times that I became a believer also.

Mama was a loving and caring mother. Besides seeing to our every day needs — good food, clean clothes, a clean house, and taking care of us when we were sick.; she also encouraged us to do well in school and think about getting a higher education. She worried about us even

after we were grown and had our own children and grandchildren. I still remember an incident that occurred when I was a little girl about eight or nine years old. I met my Aunt Annie on the way home from school and she invited me to go with her to the PD Store to buy a pair of shoes. I was so thrilled that my teenaged aunt wanted me along, I forgot I was supposed to go directly home after school. I went with my aunt and it must have taken longer than we thought it would take. On our way home, we met my mother. She was angry and wouldn't even listen to Aunt Annie's apology. She yelled at me the rest of the way home about how irresponsible I had been. At the time, I felt resentment because I thought I was being punished unjustly for something so trivial, especially since it was the first time I had ever done it. It wasn't until I had my own children that I realized how frantic she must have been when I didn't get home on time. She had gone to her mother's house, then to each of her sisters' houses searching and not finding me, thinking the worst. When my son Erik was three years old, he got lost at an amusement park, and I went through the same stages of being worried, scared, and relieved when I finally found him. I knew then that my mother reacted as she did because she loved me so much.

Mama was a worrier but she didn't like for us to worry about her. When I told her we were moving to Tucson and would be closer to her and Daddy, she said, "Don't do it for us. Your Daddy and I can take care of ourselves. Don't worry about us." In the past couple of years, it became a litany, "We're fine, don't worry about us." Of course I did worry, hadn't I been brought up by a master worrier? This past year, I especially worried when I noticed she was losing so much weight. Every time I brought up the subject, that something must be wrong and she should see the doctor, she stubbornly refused to do so and repeated, "I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

Like so many others of her generation, my mother was a frugal person. She was raised during the Depression so she knew what it was like to go without. During World War II, she took care of me and my brother Richard while Daddy was away at war. She learned to make do with what she had and to save when she had extra. Her tastes were simple. She preferred to wear one of the cotton blouses she sewed for herself than a fancy silk blouse. When we, her children got older and had our own money, we bought her expensive gifts, wanting the best for her. Mama thanked us, and oftentimes put them away. Maybe she was saving them for a special occasion or maybe she felt uncomfortable wearing them.

There were four hobbies that brought joy to my mother. She collected dolls and salt and pepper shakers, and she crocheted and sewed. When I first noticed the dolls in her house, I asked her where she got them. "From the dump," she said. She revealed that since she had never had a doll as a child, she always craved one. Whenever she saw one at the dump, she rescued it, cleaned it up and sewed new clothes for it. Once we saw what her doll collection meant to her, we, her children, started giving her dolls for her birthday, beautiful porcelain dolls. Her collection grew, but I don't think the newer dolls were ever as precious as her "dump dolls." I never asked what her attraction was to salt and pepper shakers but as I went on my travels or in to antique stores, I bought them and so did my brothers and sister-in-law. Her hobbies of crocheting and sewing brought her two-fold enjoyment. She liked keeping her hands busy and creating something lovely, but I think she got even more pleasure from giving it to someone she cared for.

There are so many things I wanted to say to you, Mama, but regret I never found the right time. I'm glad that I did say, "I love you" every time we said good-bye on the phone or when we parted. But I never told you how proud I was to be your daughter, how much you influenced who I am, how beautiful you were in your own quiet way, how much I admired and respected you,

how much I wish I had inherited your beautiful eyes and long eyelashes, how long it took me to be proud of my Indian nose which I did inherit from you, and you from Mama Teresita, and she from Grandma Pepa and which now my Granddaughter Mandy has gotten from me, and most important of all, how you rooted me in “la familia.”

So I am telling you all of this right now. I know you’re listening to this eulogy up there in heaven and by now you’ve probably already said “calláte” several times. But today is your day and you’ll be hearing your name all day long as we, tu familia y tus amigos, share our memories of you with each other. Rest in peace, Mama and don’t worry about us, we’ll be fine!

Elena Díaz Bjorkquist