**Queer Newark Oral History Project**
**Interviewee: Marleny Franco**
**Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone**
**Date: November 19, 2016**
**Location: Rutgers University-Newark**

Kristyn Scorsone: Today is November 19, 2016. My name is Kristyn Scorsone. I am interviewing Marleny Franco at Rutgers-Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you for doing this with us. My first question to you is, when and where were you born?

Marleny Franco: I was born in Cali, Colombia. South America.

Kristyn Scorsone: How long did you live there for?

Marleny Franco: Until I was about nine years old. Then we moved to the United States.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you move to New Jersey right away?

Marleny Franco: No. We came to New York in Brooklyn.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Marleny Franco: We were there for about a year, then we moved to New Jersey.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where in New Jersey?

Marleny Franco: By the shore. The Hazlet area, Holmdel, Middletown.

Kristyn Scorsone: Who raised you?

Marleny Franco: My parents. Both mom and dad, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you have siblings as well?

Marleny Franco: A lot. There's seven of us altogether.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you grow up in one household as you came of age, or did you move around a lot?

Marleny Franco: No, we pretty much—didn't move very much. We were in Colombia and we lived in a relatively large metropolitan area, one of the largest. Then we moved here, once we settled down in Monmouth County area. In fact, most of my family's still there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you enjoy coming to the U.S. or was it hard for you?

Marleny Franco: It was quite difficult. Very difficult, actually, for me.

Kristyn Scorsone: Missing friends and all of that kind of thing?

Marleny Franco: Just missing a different lifestyle that you were used to. It was completely different than here.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was your neighborhood like in Hazlet?

Marleny Franco: It was somewhat suburbia, to rural, at that time. A lot of farms and very—not multicultural. It was totally—at that time, I think it was more of a lower middle-class neighborhood, or a working class like neighborhood. And it was all white. We were the only, probably the only minority, that was coming in to the town, to the township itself, at that time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were you welcomed or?

Marleny Franco: No. (Laughs) Not at all. We were welcomed with eggs, and all kinds of other things thrown at our cars, and all kinds of words written on our car, at that time.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you parents deal with that?

Marleny Franco: They were in a state of shock, I'm sure, just as much as we were, but there's not much else we could do.

Kristyn Scorsone: What brought you here?

Marleny Franco: My two older brothers were getting ready to go to college. The type of degrees they wanted were not being offered in Colombia at that time. My aunt had moved here and married. Proposed to my dad to come up, and he can work here. She would help them out, and consequently, the boys could go to college.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did your parents do for a living?

Marleny Franco: My dad was an accountant here, or worked in the accounting department. He had his own business in Colombia. My mom was typical housewife in Colombia, and also helped him manage the business.

Kristyn Scorsone: The accounting business?

Marleny Franco: No, he was a major distributor for the country, of sugarcane and candy.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh.

Marleny Franco: Kids' candy, and all kinds of a candy.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, did you have a lot of candy in the house then?

Marleny Franco: Nope. No candy in the house. No. We had very little candy we were allowed to eat, actually.

Kristyn Scorsone: (Laughs) I bet.

Marleny Franco: We got to see it, but not really touch it. Well, it was all kept in the warehouses.

Kristyn Scorsone: What kind of schools did you attend? Did you go to private school?

Marleny Franco: Yeah. It was all private schools.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Marleny Franco: While I was in Colombia. Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: What about here?

Marleny Franco: Pretty much public schools, except in high school, I went to private.

Kristyn Scorsone: How would you describe yourself when you were younger?

Marleny Franco: In what sense?

Kristyn Scorsone: Your personality. What kind of kid were you?

Marleny Franco: I was a little bit introverted, and very tomboyish. I got kicked out of a couple schools for being too tomboyish in Colombia. Climbing trees and things like that were not part of the package deal. It was considered inappropriate for a young girl to be doing those kinds of things.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did your parents, were they upset at all about you being tomboyish?

Marleny Franco: I think they just took it in stride that I had so many older brothers, that it was probably more natural for that to happen. I don't think they gave it a thought, and there was too many of us to really deal with the idea that I was a little bit different.

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm. Did religion play a role in your life at all?

Marleny Franco: When I was younger, somewhat, but not a lot. My parents were not your traditional Catholics. They followed the religion, and the private schools in Colombia are pretty much all Catholic at that

time. I went to a Catholic school, but my dad did not care for the Catholic religion itself. But it was a more spiritual family. Yes, it was definitely an impact on me, tremendously, on me.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you tell me a favorite memory growing up?

Marleny Franco: Going to the river, which we used to go often, to do large cookouts with the family. Probably my favorite memory is that I was—always put on a dress. In that time, dresses were pretty much white, and they were starched, [06:34] so they kind of flared out. And they used to itch like crazy. I hated them. I absolutely hated these dresses.

It was every day, it was, "Oh, my god, I can't stand this." We were going to the river, and with my cousins and my uncles. My uncle said, "How do you expect her to be in the river and go where we're going, with that dress?" I looked at him, and I thought, I just wanted to say, "Oh, my god, somebody heard me."

My dad says, "That's what girls wear." He goes, "No. She can wear pants." "No, no, no, no, no. Girls don't wear pants." There was the whole discussion that happened. My uncle won, so they went out and borrowed one of the pairs of jeans that the boys had, I guess. They rolled them up, and I actually got dressed in pants.

They were soft. I remember the texture of it, to this day, that it was very soft and pliable. I put them on, and I just thought, "My god, this existence of these clothes." It was such a feeling. The whole day, I was just elated. Just walking around in a shirt and pants, that weren't even mine. They were probably big, and whatever. I didn't really care. I was able to climb the truck and to sit down and hang out. Was the first time I was allowed to even climb and be in the back of the truck, where everybody sat down, all the boys. They

were mostly boys. There was only two girls, myself and one other, my cousin, with like five boys.

It was a really great experience that day, because I was running all over the place and in the woods, when we got by the river. It was just really nice. I still remember to this day**.**

Kristyn Scorsone: That's a really cool memory. How would you describe now, your sexual orientation, or your gender identity?

Marleny Franco: I don't really describe myself in any particular way, just because I'm very happy just being single for a number of years now. I also live somewhat the life of a monk. [08:47] Therefore, it's not something that—I don't necessarily think about, in any way, shape or form.

Not something I look at—I strive. I get drawn to people, but it's something that I quickly go back into my spirituality. Therefore, it's not really part of my life, let's just call it that, right now, in that sense. Though, most people that meet me, quickly categorize me in some form and try to maybe introduce me to people. I let them know that I'm living a single lifestyle, and that that's the way I'd like to keep it.

Kristyn Scorsone: When did you realize this about yourself?

Marleny Franco: I was probably about three or four years old, because I was very much in love with this one girl in kindergarten. I remember just being totally infatuated with her. Then, I came home, and there was discussion about "queer." Had to do with some guys that were beaten by the police, I think, to death, because they were queer. Making comments, and my brothers, that were young at that time, saying, "Yeah, those queer guys. Look at that. They had these shoes on. Oh my god. That tells me—"

I remember looking at them and thinking, "Uh-oh. This is not something you're allowed to do," and that was it. It was like I just closed up about it, and never mentioned anything. I never mentioned anything, one way or the other. Kept quiet, though my parents never made a comment about the situation, except that, "Oh. Those queer guys got killed. I can't believe it." That was it, and never really addressed it. It was more the younger kids that were talking about it.

Kristyn Scorsone: You've never talked to them about it?

Marleny Franco: No, as I got older. Yeah. I came out relatively young, when I was around 25. I showed up to a Christmas party with my pregnant wife.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Marleny Franco: I stopped the party cold. Dead silence. Everybody knew. Everybody didn't want to talk about it, but I was pretty blunt about my lifestyle, after I got older, and I left my house.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was she pregnant from a man? Or did you—

Marleny Franco: No, she was pregnant from a man.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. Were you intending on adopting? Once she gave birth?

Marleny Franco: It just happened. It was just one of those situations that happened, but I had been out already for a number of years. At that point, I had been out. Whoever didn't know, it became very clear at that point, because there were some family members that really didn't know. They just speculated. It was only more of my immediate brothers and sisters that some of them knew. Again, they didn't discuss it or address it. But at that point, it was a huge Christmas party, family party, that everybody was there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did it spark a discussion? Or did it just, still like "Live and let live" kind of thing?

Marleny Franco: Never was discussed. When the silence wore down, and everybody went back to talking, I just—it was never discussed. It's a family that just didn't address the issue. It was addressed—before that, it had been addressed by my mom and I had a discussion about it. It wasn't a really long, elaborate discussion. It was just a brief discussion.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you go to college?

Marleny Franco: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where'd you go?

Marleny Franco: I actually went to finish my college here in Rutgers. I did my master's here at Rutgers.

Kristyn Scorsone: Newark or New Brunswick?

Marleny Franco: New Brunswick. I worked here at this building, in this building. I was here for a number of years. Then at the building, the Smith Building? I think so, yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did you get your degree in?

Marleny Franco: Plant physiology.

Kristyn Scorsone: What drew you to that?

Marleny Franco: At that time, I was married, and my husband was studying animal science. He was getting his master's in animal science. When I went to Cook College, which it was called at that time, I had been working and going to school part-time for a number of years while he was also working, going part-time.

I just showed up with all my transcripts and asked the Dean. I said, "I need a degree. How can I wrap up real quickly?" I didn't have but one car, one car we were sharing. So it was really coming to Cook.

He looked, and he said, "We only have animal science and plant science. What would you like?" I said, "I'm not an animal person." He said, "Okay, plants sounds good." I said, "Sounds good to me." He drew up the curriculum, so I would be done within a year and a half.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you come to enjoy it?

Marleny Franco: Oh yeah. Yeah. Actually, yes, very much so. [14:07]

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. How did you meet your husband?

Marleny Franco: He was a friend of my brother's who was going to college with them.

Kristyn Scorsone: When did you guys get married?

Marleny Franco: Back in '69.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did you do after college?

Marleny Franco: I started working right here in Rutgers, running the urban garden program.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay, what was that like?

Marleny Franco: That was really interesting. It was actually quite fascinating. That's how I ended up working in Newark. The job was running the urban gardening program, but it was a lot more than that, because at that

point there was over 2000 lots that were empty in Newark. It was a federal grant that had come through for a number of years that was earmarked to help inner-city individuals grow their own food, in order to help subsidize their food, et cetera. It was a real eye-opener in terms of the possibilities that were there. It taught me a lot, in terms of the people that were here, and certain correlations of race that I also saw in Colombia, and poverty, especially the poverty.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did here relate to Colombia?

Marleny Franco: My mom, we were relatively in an upper-middle-class family, so my mom had the habit of having the maid cook extra food. Then people would knock on her door. She would always give out food to whoever came. A meal, whatever we ate. She would save two, three meals and then people would come. I guess the house got known as that, so people came often, usually maybe three, four times a week, sometimes more, to request for food. What I noticed as a kid is that there was always women and children that were knocking on that door. Always. It made an impression on me, whether subconsciously or whatever, but I remember thinking, "It's always the woman with the kid." As a little kid, I was whatever, four, five, six, or three. Then coming here, as I traveled the city and began to really get to know what my job was going to be, it was the same thing. It was women and children that were being impacted by the poverty. In many cases, it was multigenerational, where you had the grandmother maybe raising the kids, because the daughter had gone on drugs, or the daughter was working, trying to make ends meet. And the father had been locked up or dead due to overdose. I saw that there was the same problem, that it was always being impacted by the gender, and the fact that in many—especially here where I was the midst of it all—

what I perceived was a type of control that was happening on a larger scale that was almost unbeknownst to them. Where, “Do you not see that if you get into the trap of taking drugs and alcohol, you’re always going to be kept at this lower level? You’re never going to get out?” And it’s almost like the powers that be was going to keep you there, exactly where you want, you know where they would like, versus getting out of the situation and moving on.

That was their lifestyle, and they lived it. [18:01] I can’t tell you how many people I saw die here in the city, that I knew through either educational programs or different kinds of programs, that I would hear “so-and-so’s son just died.” Or “Do you remember we were hanging out with so-and-so?” Yeah. “He's dead.” Or I would see them, and I would be unbelievably shocked. They were decimated. You know, that they had either had acquired AIDS from drugs, or whatever. Shortly thereafter, of course they were dead. [18:36]

Kristyn Scorsone: This was in the ‘80s?

Marleny Franco: Yeah. I came here in early ‘80s, and was here all the way through. I think almost 2000 or 2000.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was it around this time that you established the Greater Newark Conservancy?

Marleny Franco: Yes, I think it was 1987 or ‘88 that I started it.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you start it?

Marleny Franco: I started it as a way to complement the urban gardening program. The one thing that—I just rode through a couple areas in Newark that I used to come through. I still see the same dilapidated buildings, in many cases, the same dilapidated lots.

One of the things that impacted me was the fact that there was such little greenery. At that time, there was research that was being done by one of the universities in California. I'm not sure exactly which one it was, but it was just one of the major universities there. There was a professor who had done some research and it related to the fact that if you put prisoners within a green space, the crime rate and the violence went down significantly, even within the prisons. There would be less fights. There would be less—a lot less of things [inaudible] happening. People would calm down. They were doing all kinds of analysis, and the conclusion was that, basically, the more greening you had, the people just became much more relaxed. They were more at peace with it.

Though we were very actively putting in the gardening program, I still felt that it was only putting a band-aid on a gash, or even what I saw more as an injury. The limitations of the money was very much earmarked by the federal government, that we were only allowed to provide food. What I started doing, was that I trained my staff, and got them to not just provide food, but go into the schools and train teachers, so that we can have a community garden with the kids, and teach science using horticulture as a tool.

I happened to get a new boss, because the other one retired. The head of the department came to me and said, "You are to stop doing that. You're not allowed to do that." He basically was trying to shut me down.

One of the reasons, also, because he found out I was gay. He made war, really declared war, and was going to get me out, one way or the other. I decided that what I was doing was really of value. I could not see myself turning away.

At that point, we had maybe 15 schools or 10 schools we were working with. I just didn't have it in me to go back to the teachers in the schools and say, "Mr. Cupcho just told me that I couldn't do this anymore." I got together with a couple of friends, and some people from Newark, and I said, "I want to set up a nonprofit."

I actually went and talked to the woman who had set up the Food Bank. Kathleen DiChiara. I said to her, "Kathleen, what do you have to do for a nonprofit? I want to do this." She says, "You need three names." I said, "Good. I have one?" She goes, "Yep, you can use my name." Then I got two other names, and I went home and wrote it up and set it up.

Then I started working two jobs, basically. I would leave work from here, then I would go home. At that time is when I moved to Newark, just because I needed that extra time. I needed two hours; I was commuting about an hour. I figured if I moved to Newark, I can then consequently dedicate more time.

I did that, and I started working on the development, and writing proposals at night and sending them out. I was very fortunate that the head of the brewery here in Newark, at that time, had been born and raised in Newark. When I told him what I wanted to do and why I wanted to do it, he very much set me up with a significant grant, which was like $54,000. At that time, it was significant, very, very significant.

Kristyn Scorsone: How many people did you get on your staff initially?

Marleny Franco: I think we started out with about three or four, with that grant. Then I also got a second grant right away, from the state. Within a short time, I hired about three, four people to help me start implementing it.

What I was trying to do was complemented by not just doing the educational work, but also trying to make the gardens look more landscaped. Consequently, it'd be a combination between green space and educational space.

Kristyn Scorsone: You said there was a lot of empty lots in Newark. Did you start taking them over and putting gardens?

Marleny Franco: We did take a number of them over, and I had some plots that were almost an acre. Big. Right here in Central Ward. Some smaller plots in other wards. It was one of those things. We had to clean them out, and you had to clear them, and you had to get rid of the rubble. You got to import a lot of the soil, you had to make all raised beds. You got to fence them in, in many cases.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you get volunteers for that?

Marleny Franco: I worked with the community. I would always went back and started working the community, but I wasn't trying to duplicate, necessarily, the work of what Rutgers was trying to do. Rather, trying to work to complement that.

Once ,within two years, I moved full-time to it, I no longer was trying to really complement it. I decided it would be easier to just set up everything, and do it myself. In the sense of the organization, not myself. It was just easier than trying to walk around rules and regulations when I had none. We can just make our own rules.

We were also able to educate at that time a lot more students, by following our guidelines. Put together a lot more programs, and develop a lot of curriculum. I found out from the teachers

themselves what were the requirements, and what needed to be done, so that they could participate. They said, "We have to meet this curricular standard. We have to be able to teach this and this and this." So I hired teachers to help me develop the curriculums, so that our horticultural curriculum complemented or included everything that they had to teach, that they can use the garden as a teaching ground.

Kristyn Scorsone: The curriculum was all—what did the curriculum look like?

Marleny Franco: It was all hands-on. Everything was hands-on. In part, is because I'm not really what I would say, a very indoor person. I enjoyed outdoors, and I noticed that when I was outdoors, I also learned easier when it was hands-on. I was also trying to encourage kids to grow up with the concepts of being outdoors, and enjoying the outdoors and seeing it from a different perspective, versus just going to school in a room in a classroom. By trying to make it all as hands-on as possible. An example, for instance, is one where we would grow, let's say, tomatoes. Then they had to measure how much did the tomato grow per week? Then how far apart the tomatoes were. Then where did the origin of tomatoes come from? How is it utilized? Even though it's more of an Italian dish that they were used to hearing it, where did they really come from? And what was the culture in that particular country? Which, of course, they come from Latin America and all that. Then they had to learn all about that. So we tried to incorporate as much of the different topics as possible into that curriculum, so that consequently, the teacher would feel very comfortable and would have the flexibility to come into the garden and utilize that as the learning tool.

Then we had it—what we'd focus on wasn't really trying to work on a one-on-one with students, but working with teachers, training the teachers. Then we would be there to assist them whenever they needed the assistance. [27:42]

Kristyn Scorsone: Did Greater Newark Conservancy have a brick-and-mortar office at the time?

Marleny Franco: At that time, no. We were utilizing the United Way building when we first got started.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where is that?

Marleny Franco: Down on Washington Street. It's still there. I think they had some empty rooms on the third or fourth floor. I went ahead and I painted them, and fixed them up. I had made a lot of contacts through Rutgers in the urban gardening program, so I was able to contact some people from what was then MetLife, and a couple of insurance companies. Got furniture, and got different things donated and set up an office.

Kristyn Scorsone: When did you guys get your own space?

Marleny Franco: We got a space, and I don't remember the exact time, but it was about three or four years before I left where there was a building that was up—I don't know if it was up for sale. It was just empty. We acquired a building that was a synagogue, had been a Jewish synagogue.

I decided that I was going to develop, at that time, an environmental and educational center. My idea was that in the '80s, it was, yeah, probably late '80s, '90s. It was just starting the Internet, to really explode. My whole thought was that if we could set up and be one of the first to set up a horticultural and a

gardening library, where people would be drawn from all different walks of life, whether they were in Newark or not. Set it up electronically, with videos, and games. I had a number of other ideas of how to bring people electronically and generate income at the same time, so I could support the organization. That it would be nice to have that library. [29:43]

And in addition to that, at that time, I had traveled to somewhere in the Midwest. I had looked at some buildings that were being heated almost with no electricity. They were pretty much almost off, completely off the grid. Was using a multiplicity of different factors, such as, not just insulation, but solar energy, and just a number of other different ways of heating the building, and cooling the building. I decided that it would be really cool to turn around and create that kinda green building. At that time, LEED was not around. In fact, it was being just developed, almost simultaneously. So I decided that we would turn and make this building as a green building and at the same time, have an outdoor educational space. Then inside, we were going to have a library that was all electronically, or mostly electronically, in a place where kids can learn at the same time where they were having fun. [30:52]

Kristyn Scorsone: Did it all come to fruition?

Marleny Franco: Not completely, no. In fact, I left. I was pretty fried by the time I left, but it was—when I left the—what was set up was the design of it. I left the design and the master plan in place. The outdoor design was left in place. Funding was starting to pretty much gel, at that time, for the outdoor space. I also left the building with—completely sealed, the envelope sealed. The windows, and all the repointing of the building, the roof, and all those things sealed. The

basement gutted out, where the space was going to be for the offices, then the main floor.

That's when I left. The board thought I was taking too long to raise the money that needed to be raised. Interestingly enough, I just drove by, and it's still not finished. What I did in three years, was too slow. What they've done in, I don't know, fourteen years, and it's still not finished. It looks like their speed is not exactly what I would call fast.

Kristyn Scorsone: What were the biggest challenges that you faced while you were there?

Marleny Franco: I would say raising money. It became an all-encompassing job. The more that we grew, the less contact that I had with the community. The less contact that I had with the school system, with the kids, or anything like that, which is really what I enjoyed. It became pretty much a writing and paper and totally administrative work. I didn't have the capacity or the support to be able to meet with the board, and say, "Look, this has to shift. We need to restructure. We need to do something differently," so that I could do the things that I enjoyed. I became very much just a fundraiser.

Kristyn Scorsone: I notice on the website now, they do a lot of work with formerly-incarcerated people. Did that stem from what you saw? What you explained to me before, about—

Marleny Franco: That was the first program, yeah, that I did. We always work with incarcerated. The very, very first training program that I did was a training program here in the city of Newark. Was right on Route 21. It was with people who had been incarcerated. Also, I used to

utilize them a lot, in terms of not just job training, but also in terms of actually developing the building.

Kristyn Scorsone: What's it like to work with that community?

Marleny Franco: I don't think it was any different than working with any community, except that they have a lot of issues that they have to resolve. Depending on how you approach it, a lot of them are very closed-off because they don't know how you're going to approach them.

When I worked with them, sometimes I would take them out alone. I've even invited some to my house, and had them over for dinner. It was really interesting to watch. All kinds of actions happened. [34:40] From people that were so frustrated and had a lot of anger built-up.

I remember that this guy. I said, "We need to plant these 60 shrubs." He dug 60 holes in about an hour and a half. I have never in my life seen anything like it. To this day. A machine doesn't do that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Marleny Franco: It was just utter—his frustration and everything about him with that pick. He dug out those holes. And I left him alone. I was not going to interfere with whatever was going on.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. (Laughs)

Marleny Franco: About an hour and a half, maybe two, I came back—I didn't come back, I was just watching from afar. I finally came over. He goes, "They're done." I said, "That's phenomenal." (laughs) He didn't want to talk. He didn't want anything. And I left him alone, but it was really interesting that, of course, we planted them, and they

looked phenomenal, because he dug the holes. It just showed the frustration that was coming out of this man. Whatever issues.

You saw the same thing with the children. I remember one time, one of my staff person came back, and said that they were clearing out the land for setting up the garden. She gave him a weed whacker, to one of the kids. Initially, when you went to the schools, sometimes some schools will give you all the kids they didn't want in the classroom. They would give you all the whatever, slackers, and troublemakers, and all that. "Yeah, sure, take them to the garden! Boom. You can have them." This one young man, she gave him a weed whacker. You know what a weed whacker is, right?

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm.

Marleny Franco: Yeah. He said, "We're going to cut the weeds." This kid went wild with this weed whacker and hacked the heck out of everything! Then sat down and cried for about 20 minutes. After that, he was not only apparently quite normal, but he became very enthusiastic about school. Became one of the best students when it came to the science, and some of the fields that we were working with. I thought that was really cool.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow, yeah. That was really cool. According to the current website, there's a lot of different program areas. Environmental education, community greening, urban agriculture, environmental justice, job training, youth leadership programs. Did that all start with you?

Marleny Franco: Yeah, all of them. It's the same thing. Yeah, we were working with a lot of the Ironbound people. Doing environmental education, environmental justice. Then the community greening out of the

gardening program, the greening program, then the education, the youth education with schools. When I left, we were working with 33 schools.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Marleny Franco: About 34,000 students.

Kristyn Scorsone: All in Newark?

Marleny Franco: All in Newark. A little bit in Irvington, not a lot, but some. I used to go to Trenton and help them once in a while. I also used to go to other urban areas. Camden, and helped them set up some community garden program and New Brunswick.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's cool.

Marleny Franco: Then the job training is one of the first things that we did whenever there was job training available. Money. We would apply for it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you get a lot of—a high turnout for your events?

Marleny Franco: Pretty much. Sometimes, couple hundred people. A lot of community people. I remember was close to a hundred different community blocks that we were working with at that point.

Kristyn Scorsone: How did you reach the community outside of the schools? Was it word of mouth?

Marleny Franco: I did it by just knocking on people's doors. I would go after work, and go out in my car, park it somewhere, and knock door to door for about couple hours. If I knew somebody in the particular block, the easiest way was just to say, "Hey there, are you willing to have an event at your house? I'll bring some snacks or whatever. Can you make some coffee and tea? We'll have a presentation." I used

to have slide presentation and then come in and do that with the community and talk about the community garden programs or other programs that we were doing. Eventually, somebody got hired to do that, and that's the part that I began to miss, but—because somebody else had to go and do that. I would meet with maybe different communities, 40, 50 communities within a given period of time, maybe a year. Out of that, we would get quite a number of people who were interested, then I would assign people as community garden leaders, to go ahead and look for land that we could utilize, whether it was private or public. If there wasn't anything around the immediate neighborhood, or try to hook them up with whatever other community garden was within the local area, or try to look at other issues, whether environmental justice issues that were happening within the community. Or the schools.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were folks generally receptive?

Marleny Franco: I would say they were. Especially because in their mind they perceived me as someone who was in charge. I was taking the time to be there with them, so they respected a lot of that. I did it as much as I could, until the organization go too big and I didn't have the time anymore.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that your favorite part of the job?

Marleny Franco: I would definitely say doing that was my favorite part of the job. Helping develop the actual community gardens and the school gardens. Because it required construction and I've always loved construction.

Kristyn Scorsone: Why did you love construction?

Marleny Franco: I just do. Since I was a kid here, young teenager. I would always volunteer for painting and tiling and doing whatever meant. I still make a living out of that today.

Kristyn Scorsone: You have a landscaping—

Marleny Franco: I have a landscaping and construction company.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is that what you started—did you start that after you left—

Marleny Franco: Yes. Yeah, I started after I left the conservancy, about a year after. I took a year off to find myself (laughs) and to decompress from all the stress.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, did that feel like—thinking if it was me, I'd feel like my identity was off. I wouldn't know how to—

Marleny Franco: I had lost my soul, at the end, with the conservancy. I realized that when I no longer looked at people for people, but I looked at people for money, because that's all I was doing. When I caught myself doing that one day, I thought, "I can't do this anymore." I had lost total touch with the community at that point. It was just, "Why am I doing this, even?" It made no sense anymore. When things don't make sense and you don't enjoy the work, it becomes drudgery. I knew it was time to move on.

If I had been smart, I probably could a just requested a sabbatical or something like that and give myself the time, but I didn't. And it's okay. I set up a landscaping company that I can design, and do installations. Then I have my own version of a nonprofit on the side.

Kristyn Scorsone: What's that?

Marleny Franco: I have a website called Gardening the Organic Way. I basically do all kinds of workshops. All kinds of different things that I offer the community, on how to grow their own food, because I still believe that food is still an issue. As we move closer and closer to where I perceive we're heading to, in terms of the mass amount of people that are coming together, we're further and further removed from our food source.

Also, we're gotten more and more into the toxicity world of all kinds of pesticides. Now that they know that they're toxic anyway, but they end up on people's plates. I think that food is even more pressing now than it was when I started doing this work. I try to offer as much as I can. I do videos, and all kinds of things, about growing your own food organically.

Kristyn Scorsone: The videos are on your website?

Marleny Franco: Yeah, yeah, they have links to it, on YouTube. They're on YouTube and all that, but they have links all through the garden site. Then I make a living out of the landscaping. It's trying to do it both ways. Try to keep that world of helping people with food, because I really think it's essential.

Kristyn Scorsone: You have books, too, that you've written, right?

Marleny Franco: Yeah. Yeah. I have videos and—I have a video in them—a video in the [books]—then also, a lot of write-ups about different topics. I actually have twelve. It's just that I've only published seven. I haven't had time to do the other five, because I have to do it on my off-season, which is just ending. So I'll probably put one more out in December and January.

Kristyn Scorsone: What do you think is the biggest issue or biggest couple of issues that we face regarding farming, or food and water?

Marleny Franco: The thing that I have noticed being in the landscaping business, and being outdoors all the time, make sure of that, is that a lot of people don't make the correlation between climate change and global warming to the food that's on their table. [45:16]

I bring that up in one of the books I put out, called *Why Organic?* The reason they don't make the correlation is because when you go to the store and you buy apples, and you see apples, and you say, "Oh great! Apples are out. Fantastic." They never pick them up and say, "Why is this apple still coming from Chile?" Or, "Why is this apple from Israel? We're supposed to have our apples out already."

It's the early apples, or the early peaches, or things like that, where we have this warm climate that comes in, all the trees bud, then we get the frost. What climate change has done, and I've noticed that it's getting worse, is there's a fluctuation that's taking place. [46:08] Versus a steady, normal cooling or warming that naturally used to take place. Now, there's more of this huge ups and downs, ups and downs, ups and downs. The impact it makes on the food and the flowers, and a whole bunch of other things, is that we lose a lot of food, a lot of more locally grown food. Or even food that grows in California that gets sent here, where—I read about, and I try to stay up to date on these things—is that they just lost a crop because they had a huge surge of warm air. Then boom, they got big frost.

It's the same thing that happens with the oranges in Florida where they're constantly battling that. I have seen the last two years, not so much last year but the year before, where we lost almost a crop completely. This year, I noticed that a lot of the crop was also lost.

The reason I also know this is because I belong to a few "pick your own" farms where they notify when it's ready for picking. Instead, you get a notice that says, "We lost all our crop to the sudden warmth and that, so sorry, there will be no pick-your-own this year." That's only in Warren County. I began to pay attention to that, so that aspect means that people still see the apples in the supermarket, but they're not from here. They're not paying attention because they're not familiar with the farming cycles. If you pick up that apple, well it came thousands of miles away.

The distance alone that you're generating your food puts us at a really high risk. If, let's say, we were to go to war, and if you have enough countries that don't exactly like our politics or our policies, maybe because who's in charge, now they can withdraw that food from us. [48:20]

That's one aspect that I see that it's definitely a direct link to the climate change. The fact that we are probably way more, way more, twice, three times, who knows, more urbanized. We're even further removed from the farming. I came to Monmouth County, and there was a tomato farm not too far. You could walk to it. Now there's a Pathmark or something there.

We used to walk to the orchards, and now there's a movie theater there. The farming is just not there. I live in Hunterdon County, and I see even then a lot of farming that is constantly being lost and lost and lost and lost as time goes by.

I think that food will be in shortage in the coming years. I think it's more important, and a lot of people think like I do. There's a lot of farmers that are real small but have been set up that are community support agriculture farms, and things like that. From my perspective, I think it's really important that local produce gets

supported, and local things. I know that in Newark there's an indoor type of farm that happens.

Kristyn Scorsone: I think I've heard of that, yeah.

Marleny Franco: Yeah, and I think it's phenomenal. They're growing herbs and things like that, greens and all that. I think the more people can become connected to their food in whatever way they can, and it's really important. I know that a lot of towns now have community gardens, a lot of towns. In Hillsborough there's a huge one. And in just a lot of little towns.

Kristyn Scorsone: They've started one in Kearny, where I live, a couple years ago.

Marleny Franco: I belong to the one in Frenchtown. Just different, different ways that you can join and connect to the food and learn how to grow some food, so that you have that connection. Those are really two issues that I see with that. The fact that if we can somehow connect more and more. Then the last thing, is just the fact that the quality of the food is so poor. If you were just buying regular produce.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you trust organic?

Marleny Franco: I think you can if you really make sure it doesn't come from China. I know that some stores, and I won't mention them, carry organic produce that doesn't come from the United States. I don't trust the Chinese, anything that they grow.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is it the pollution problem there?

Marleny Franco: The pollution problem, the fact that their scruples are not exactly there. The fact that I had friends who worked in the pharmaceutical industry, and her job was to basically guard, 24 hours a day, whatever from the field to production. It took a bunch of them. She says, "We cannot stop, even at night, be there guarding. Because

god forbid we do, they will come in and spray with who-knows-what. Or they will do so."

Then, when they harvest, they have to behind them and in front of them have cars guarding what got harvested, so they can bring it to the plant. Then in the plant, this constant supervision, so that it can be processed and the pharmaceutical can have a clean product.

That's the kind of people and the mentality that exists. They have no conscience when it comes to things that need to be clean, urbanizing. You constantly see this. We've seen it for years. Baby food contaminated with this. Regular food. We're still buying from them. There's nothing that stops us from saying, "Enough."

People just want to have food on the table and they don't care. Even people with means, they don't care. As long as there's food on the table, if everything else around me is trash, it's okay. Unfortunately, that mentality has gotten us into a lot of trouble. I don't trust, definitely, things that come from China.

Also, a lot of other counties don't have any regulations. When you hear President administration wanting to get rid of even the [EPA] here, that's big. That's really big, because—and I mean President comma, let's clarify that. Because that's probably one of the big safety factors that we have right now. Where at least we know that there's certain regulations, certain guidelines that are in place.

Though we're pretty behind when it comes to, let's say, Europe. Or some of the countries in Latin America, where they have very strict guidelines about organic and whole states and whole regions that are only organic, and no pesticides allowed, no GMOs. That's the other thing. It's illegal here to do research on GMOs.

Therefore, nobody can say that they're not even good for you. Because, who's in control here? Obviously, the large corporations, but everywhere else in the world, just about, has banned them. Because of the danger of them. But we're still ingesting them.

When you're not buying organic, not only are you supporting an industry that is quite dangerous, but that the rest of the world is saying, "You guys are nuts. That's poison, what you're eating." Those three things combined makes my head spin. Why everybody's not out there putting in, growing some aspect of your food?

Kristyn Scorsone: Creating your own personal community garden is the best way to protect yourself, I guess?

Marleny Franco: Yeah. If you don't have anything, a backyard, a community garden. That's a real big issue, let's say, with a city like Newark, where you have then, and probably now, because I don't see anything changed, where they don't give that much value to the green space. They don't give that much value to the sense of community.

The fact that a lot of these community gardens provided not just the food. What they were really providing was sense of community, a sense of safe space, and a sense for interaction to take place between older generations and younger generations, especially when you have a generation that was missing in-between. I think that that value, though it doesn't have a monetary value, it's probably one of the biggest benefits that you have.

I think the highlight of one thing that happened to me right before I left, and then I knew I could leave, is that I had told myself if I

could help one person, I would be satisfied, feel like I did something of value.

Maybe six months before, a letter came in from an eighth grade teacher. My staff went out to do her weekly visits or training with some teacher. She gave her a copy of the letter. The letter was from a young man, who said he was waiting anxiously to drop out of school as soon as he was of age. That he wanted to thank her, because she had taken him to the community garden. That somehow that changed his whole aspect of things, and that he had gotten to enjoy so much, that he had just graduated from Rutgers with a degree in biology. It was a long letter, so that's the gist of it all. I remember when my staff showed it to me. I looked at it, and it just rang a bell. I said, "Okay, you've accomplished your mission. You can get out of here now." (Laughs) It was like, "That's it."

Nobody foresaw that. Nobody sat long enough, and if that young man was in eighth grade, that means that nine years had gone by. People want to know, how do you get results? You want instantaneous results. We're Americans. We want things right now. And that kind of work requires time.

When I look around, and drive through a city that still lacks a lot of green space and a lot of community space, and a lot of areas where people can come together. You say, "We have two large parks." That's the whole point; one is in the north and one's all the way in the west side, but you have to have that small interactive spaces. Part of it is that it has to be community, in order for it to get the community to participate, to come together, and to be able to maintain those spaces.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you follow what's going on with the Dakota Access Pipeline?

Marleny Franco: Yes. Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: I feel like that one of their issues is the worry that the water could be compromised. Do you think that's a real danger?

Marleny Franco: Absolutely, because one of the things that if you were to test the water, the underground water. A lot of parts in New Jersey, it's contaminated. The more urbanized you have, the more contamination you have. You have to filter it out. You have to do all kinds of things.

Anytime you're polluting something, eventually ends up in the ground. No matter how you look at it, it's going to end up in that ground. If you throw a chemical in, any kind of chemical, it's going to end up there.

If you have something like a major pipeline that is transporting through thousands of miles, the potential for an accident is a thousand miles long, where could leak anywhere, it could break. "Oh, no, it's going to last." Eventually, something's going to go.

One of the interesting things is that—I read an article that was documenting that we're putting in a pipeline because we don't want to turn around and instead invest in repairing all the broken pipes or the pipes that are in need of repair. That if we actually just repaired what was already in place, we would have more than enough pipeline to transport whatever it is we want to transport.

But it's obviously a little costly, so instead, might as well just put a new one in. It was such an American thing. I say that with a certain amount of cynicism, because I'm American too. But I say it because it's like, that's how we think. "Throw away the old. Get rid of it. If it's slightly weathered," and that's it.

It's interesting, because it's our whole psyche, and that's what I'm talking about. There has to be something that has to change. The rest of the world watches us as wasteful, as little bit—not environmentally friendly. We're so behind. We don't really care, we're so caught up with the issue of money. We're great if you're money. You're not great if you don't have money. [59:49]

We're missing out on so many things. This is one issue that it's like these people are so right. It's just amazing to me, that we're just ignoring them, disrespecting them, and continually just avoid any kind of real interaction and real listening that says, "What is it that concerns you?" Or, "Why do you think that is so?" Or any kind of respect. I totally feel what they're saying. I definitely agree with the danger of it, and the impact you'll get. It'll end up all the way down to Colorado.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Marleny Franco: All the way down, contaminating so many different things. What does it go back to? Food, because it'll contaminate. If you don't have water, and if you don't have clean, drinking water, you're not going to have clean, drinking food.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Marleny Franco: It's just our value system is totally twisted.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. How do you convince someone, or talk to someone that wants to, say, start growing vegetables in their backyard? Someone who's a Newark resident, that's working two or three jobs, and has kids? How do you show them that they can still do this? How do they fit it in?

Marleny Franco: What I tell people that are really busy is that if you don't have the time or the space, to go containers, get a large container. Or make a little square. Little square patch. To grow either greenery, like lettuce or radishes, things that are fast. Because a radish, you can have it up within 30 days.

I'm building a tiny house on wheels, in addition to my job, in addition to something else I'm doing and a couple other projects.

Kristyn Scorsone: That is so cool.

Marleny Franco: I'm constructing them myself, so I'm working, probably about sixteen to eighteen hours a day. Okay? By the time it's all said and done. I didn't have time to grow a garden that much this year, so what do I do? I grabbed a whole bunch of seeds **[inaudible 01:02:21]** and I went to the garden and I just threw them. (laughs) I went like this. I padded them down, the whole thing, [inaudible] and left.

I've been harvesting greens because I had no time. People say, "You got all these greens from the garden?" I said, "Yeah, I didn't have time to do anything." Then I put in four tomato plants. I just ate my last tomatoes a couple days ago. I froze a bunch of kale, because kale is one of those that just grows. I froze all the kale and I ate lots of greens.

I had one or two other kale plants, and I harvest them. So I got something. Plus, the year that I had more time, which was last year, so if you ever have more time, you can preserve a lot of that. I still have in the refrigerator that I'm still eating the harvest from two years ago, where it's all frozen. Tons of frozen kale. I make smoothies and all kinds of things. I have sauces that I have make, and all that. It's a matter of how you divide your time. If you have

kids, which that's very common, if you can pick those kids and get them to help you, and get them involved in some way. And even if you just do two small pots, or two little areas, or one little area, it gives you a lot of satisfaction to say, "We grew this little salad by ourselves." Or these radishes, or beets or collard greens, or kale, things like that. They're somewhat easy to grow, if you just dedicate a little time, and get some kind of sheet or something in the spring so that bugs don't eat them and you grow on their behalf. That's usually my recommendation, so that you don't get into something fancy and all that. Then you can go from there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you please tell me about the tiny house on wheels?

Marleny Franco: (Laughs) I think I got grey hair from that this year. I really did. I got about three times more grey hair. I just decided that I don't want to conform to the system just yet. Never quite have. I'm getting ready to retire in a couple of years, two, three years, maybe four. I thought about it, decided that I didn't see myself living in a retirement community. [64:33] I didn't see myself living in a lot of different places. Having said that, it was like, okay. I sold my house. I had some money set aside, and I said, "Well, maybe I'll do something that I can travel with." I don't usually spend winters here.

I just decided to start building. Everybody says, "You must've watched the show." I said to them, "Actually, no, I haven't watched the show. I don't watch television." Very little television, so I don't have any of that. I just started building. I started doing research, joined a couple forums, started construction—and I started construction—well, I bought the trailer last December and really started construction in April. After work, and between work, and every other time I have available. It's not finished. I have the

shell almost completely enclosed. It's enclosed, but it's not—I'm putting in aluminum siding on it. It's actually not even aluminum siding. It's aluminum panels because I'm making it super light, so that it doesn't consume a lot of gas when you travel.

Kristyn Scorsone: It'll be drivable or you'll tow it?

Marleny Franco: No, it'll be towable. Yeah. It's got two floors on it. It's 27 foot long by—the law requires it can't be more than 8'6" wide.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Marleny Franco: I think it's 13'6" maximum height. I'm going to be 13'4" or 13'5" right under (laughs).

Kristyn Scorsone: Will you travel all over the U.S. with it?

Marleny Franco: No. Not really, especially after this election, there's no way that I would go to some states. Who knows what could happen to you? No. I've done my share of travelling. No, probably just a few—stay along the east coast, certain areas that I really enjoy. And be able to go away for the typical winter that I do, but the idea is, I have to find a place to park it. That has not manifested itself yet.

Kristyn Scorsone: I think Walmarts, the parking lots.

Marleny Franco: No, no, no, park it permanently.

Kristyn Scorsone: I see, I see.

Marleny Franco: The last thing I want to be looking at is at Walmart every day when I wake up in the morning.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, that's true. You don't wanna be having your morning cup of coffee and gazing out at Walmart.

Marleny Franco: It's been fun.

Kristyn Scorsone: That is really, really neat. I really like that. After all you've done, do you consider yourself to be an entrepreneur?

Marleny Franco: Yeah, pretty much so. I think that a lot of my family, they all have their own businesses. My dad had his own business. My uncle had his own business. Pretty much runs in the family. That and I have a couple of brothers who have their own business. Just comes with training. I don't know if it's training, genes, or who knows?

Kristyn Scorsone: What are the top traits, personality traits, do you think a person needs to have to be an entrepreneur and be successful? [68:06]

Marleny Franco: Just a really desire to work. You have to put in a lot of hours. That's the one thing I've noticed. You have to put in a lot of hours. You have to want to, be able to be flexible in the sense that at the beginning, you always have to do a lot of different hats that you have to wear. You have to do a lot of different things, and a lot of different skills. You have to be able to learn a lot of these skills, or pick them up in some form or fashion, whether through workshops, or whatever. And figure out what's going to work for you. Be able to be flexible, because sometimes when you're going in one direction, that may not necessarily be the direction that the universe wants you to take, and you end up doing something else. If the doors open up, and everything goes smoothly, so that means you're moving in the right direction.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did anybody give you a piece of advice or anything when you were starting out that helped you?

Marleny Franco: I used to draw, or at least befriend, people who were in leadership positions. I was probably younger than most of them, but I would

try to befriend them and get input from them, about whatever their skill was, especially things that I was really weak in.

I used to have a very short temper. Not so much anymore, but that—so I befriended somebody who was in human services. Somebody who said, “You do things this way. You do things that way.” Just to get advice as to how to make things happen.

Or people who just had different skills. Some of them were VPs, and some of them were different leadership positions within the corporate community. Other ones, I kept just a very casual—not casual, but very professional, but some of them I became really good friends with. I asked for advice.

But I think a lot of it just has to do with just a drive. When you’re young, you don’t think about a lot of things, you just do them. You don’t give the importance that I probably would today. When you do something, you plan things out. I think when you plan things out too much, then what happens is, you may get scared and say, “Oh, my god, I'm overwhelmed. I can’t do all this.”

When you’re young, you just go out and do it. You think whatever. It’s like building the house that I’m doing right now. A year later, it’s like, “What did I get into?” (Laughs) Would I do it again? I’m not so sure. I don’t think I would do this again. But when I just decided to do it, it was, “Hey, this is a great idea. Be able to retire in this. Won’t have to pay taxes.” All these other things that I thought about. It seemed like a good idea. It’s looking fantastic, but if you think too much, you may not get a lot done.

You do have to do it, it’s almost like a middle ground. You have to think, you have to have a goal, what you want to accomplish. You

have to have an idea of how you want to accomplish it, then look to see if any of those venues make sense.

I can't say that I'm great at doing the master plans that they always tell you to do, because I did them after the fact, maybe five, ten years later. "Yeah, you need a master—" "Okay, we'll do a master plan." I never did any even for my business, but I did clearly have a vision as to what I wanted to accomplish, and what were the things I wanted to do.

I know I want to write twelve books. I know I want to have this thing. I know that I want to do certain things **[inaudible 01:12:45]** Or, I knew that okay, I want to set up a landscaping business. I trying to fill these gaps. Now that I'm tired of doing that somewhat, okay, this is what I want to do.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you have a personal motto or mantra that you tell yourself or live by, I guess?

Marleny Franco: Today it's quite different than what I did when I was younger, but today, it's more trying to do those things that are peaceful. No matter what comes my way, to try to do it with love. I think that we live in a world of so much violence. If we can, each one, exercise peace and love, then we bring in that energy down to the Earth. The Earth needs it desperately. I try to, as they say, walk softly.

Kristyn Scorsone: How do you unwind from all that you do?

Marleny Franco: This year I have not unwind too much, because I've been building a house (laughs) but I bike. I bike, and I hike, and I kayak.

Kristyn Scorsone: What does your favorite kind of day look like?

Marleny Franco: When I have the opportunity to do some of the goals or accomplish some of the things I have, then I get a chance to maybe either go to my poetry group reading, or go for a walk or a hike, or go for a chance to go biking. I gave myself enough time to also do sometimes my spiritual practices in the morning or in the evening.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you meditate?

Marleny Franco: Yes, every day.

Kristyn Scorsone: How do you combat any self-doubt that you have?

Marleny Franco: I have a spiritual guru, and I consult regularly, that, when things seem like I'm freaking out, and I feel like the world just chose hate over love or something like that. I have enough faith in the Divine to know that things are happening for whatever reason. They have to happen this way, but at the same time, I do have a live guru that I have the option of picking up the phone or going to visit, a plane, which is what I'm doing tomorrow. Picking up advice.

I follow certain spiritual practices that keep me moving, and understanding that our time here is only passing and has only limited importance, no matter what we do. It's actually quite insignificant, whatever we do. What's important, really, is how we evolve as beings of love.

Kristyn Scorsone: When you're doing your work on landscaping, or with your house, do you have a certain process that you go through? Do you put on music or do you do things a certain way?

Marleny Franco: No, I have a staff. So for the house I have contractors that I work with, or people that I've trained to become contractors, I should say that, let me clarify that. I've cut down on my landscaping. Where I used to have a large staff, I don't anymore.

I just focus. I'm very, very focused. I think a lot of times, if you have music, or if you have other things going on, what happens is is that you lose the focus of what you're doing. I noticed that. If people are talking on the phone and they're doing something, or whatever, there's a loss of focus.

If you can just be totally focused doing exactly what you're doing, and what you're supposed to be doing, not only will time go by faster, but you'll end up with a quality product. That's really the motto that I try to do, is just get people to be focused. "No, we're doing this." "Oh, but what about this?" "No, no, no. we're not doing that. We'll get to that later. We're doing this. We're putting up these panels, or we're putting up this wall, or we're putting up this." Or, I used to say, "We're putting up this shrubs. This is what we're doing. We're pruning now." Just people that work for me, they've learned focus. They've actually told me, "I've learned how to focus so much. You're very focused and intense." Yes, if you stay focused, it just gives you a lot of energy. It's almost like a precision that comes in so that you know what to do next.

I'm totally against all this multiplicity of inputs that people set themselves up with. Because I think that it disperses the mind too much. It doesn't allow you to bring all of you into a particular project.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you ever face challenges as a business person that are related to your gender or your sexuality or your religion? Or your race or ethnicity?

Marleny Franco: Absolutely. I'll give you one example. I've gone to a customer, where she looked at me. She said, "I asked for a real landscaper," and slammed the door. (Laughs) The husband came out and tried to apologize. I knew I wasn't going to get the job, but I figured I

wasn't going to go down to their level. He said, "We're looking to do A, B, C." I very graciously just went around, gave him an estimate, gave him my card, and said, "Take care."

I know I'm never going to get a phone call. I don't discuss my sexuality, like I said, even when I was in relationship. It was none of their business. It's nobody's business. Race, you can't hide it. Not that you can hide the other one, either, because when I have my jeans on and my work boots and all that other stuff, people would automatically make assumptions.

In general, I let it just slide. There's no point of fighting bigotry, of any sorts. The most you can do is be very nice. If they confronted me, and do something, I may say something to them, to the point, and answer their question, which I have.

I don't come across as somebody who's somewhat weak or scared, so therefore most people, including men, don't necessarily approach me in that fashion, with confrontation. They kind of respect me, and I respect them.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is your demeanor then like a conscious choice? A tactic, almost?

Marleny Franco: I don't know if it's tactical. It's just that's just how I am. Like the Roger Rabbit and his girlfriend. "It's not my fault. This is how they made me."

Kristyn Scorsone: (Laughs)

Marleny Franco: "This is how they drew me." (Laughs)

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah, I remember that. What did you want to be when you were a child?

Marleny Franco: I wanted to be a political leader.

Kristyn Scorsone: Really?

Marleny Franco: My admiration was Gandhi. Indira Gandhi, the daughter. I wanted to go into politics and help the poor. Something I never pursued.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you feel like you wish you had? Or you feel like this satisfied that?

Marleny Franco: I've thought about it, and politics is so dirty and so corrupt. I thought about it at one point. I discussed it with some friends. They said they would support me, but when it came down to the money issue, it was, "No, I don't want to do that. I don't want to do that."

At that point, I was a lot more closeted, and I thought that it would be a really big issue, being lesbian and having a wife and all that stuff. It wasn't going to go over well. That was the response I got from some sponsors.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is there any questions that I haven't asked you, that you think I should have? Or anything you'd like to add or expand upon?

Marleny Franco: That I can think of off the top of my head, no. I think we give too much emphasis to gay, straight, bisexual, all these, heterosexual, that stuff instead of just being human. I think if people are just allowed to be themselves and do your own thing. So much energy's just wasted in one thing or the other. Fighting, instead of trying to come together as one large, human family.

It's the same thing with race. It's all these issues. To me, it's just mind-boggling how we're so caught up with dividing instead of unifying. I wonder how it would be if we lived in a society that tried to come together and work together and help each other. I think that we would be in so much better shape, but I don't think I will see that any time in the near future.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. Especially considering what just happened with—

Marleny Franco: Four years.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. (Laughs) Thank you so much. I really enjoyed this. Thank you.