

Journalist and Mayborn graduate student, Rebecca Aguilar conducted the oral history of Nora Lopez, the metro editor at the San Antonio Express News. The interview was conducted at March 8, 2019, at the newspaper in San Antonio, Texas.

AGUILAR: Where did you grow up?

LOPEZ: I grew up in Edinburg, Texas, which is about 30 minutes from Hidalgo on the border across Reynosa in Mexico. Edinburg is the home of UT Pan Am, now UT Rio Grande Valley, where I went to school, but it was not UT when I was there. I graduated a year or two before they became UT. It was just Pan American University when I was there.

AGUILAR: How did you parents land in that area?

LOPEZ: I think it was my dad's family who settled in Edinburg. Most of my mom's family remains in Mexico. Though she has one brother and some cousins who are in California.

My dad's family had been in Texas longer. His side is more Americanized than my moms, and they lived in Edinburg. It was fortuitous, there was a university there. My parents would not have had enough to send me away to UT Austin, which was my dream when I was growing up.

I knew I was going to be a reporter or journalist from the the time I was a freshman in high school.

AGUILAR: That early?

LOPEZ: Yes.

AGUILAR: Let's talk about your mom and dad?

LOPEZ: We were migrant workers. For the first five years of my life we lived in either Edinburg, Washington or California, but they would follow the seasons and they worked the hops in Washington State. They worked grapes and picked other fruits in California.

AGUILAR: They would take off every summer?

LOPEZ: Yes, my mom's brother lived in California and they had a little trailer in the back of their property and I remember we lived there. My grandparents, my dad's parents lived in Washington. We also lived with them for a while.

When I turned five and I remember this clearly, because that's when my mother told my dad, "I don't want to take Nora in and out of school. I want her to have steady school and do well." And that's when she told my dad you have to find a steady job and she wanted it to be in Edinburg. I don't think because she knew there was a college there, but that's where we had a support system, other family members who lived there.

My dad's first job that was not migrant work was at the *papelaria*, which was the international paper company. But actually what they made were cardboard boxes, *cartones*. He went on to become a short haul driver. He drove cement trucks throughout the Valley.

My mom was a seamstress. She mostly sewed for fun, but when I started junior high she got a job at a drapery shop. They made custom drapes. She worked there through my junior high and high school years.

AGUILAR: What characteristics do you have of your parents that have been a benefit to you as a journalist?

LOPEZ: Everybody always talks about the machismo in the Latino culture and how men are real machos and very strong, and very set in their ways, and what they say goes, but I don't know, I grew up with very strong Latina women and the Latinas ruled in the home. My mom ruled in our household and what she said is what went. Her sister, my *tia* was very social and a gregarious woman. When I became a reporter I adopted almost a persona of my *tia* and my mom, a combination of the two.

AGUILAR: That strength?

LOPEZ: Yeah. I drew all my strength from my mother and I drew from my *tia* her super bubbly personality and how she was real *conchuda*, everybody was her friend. I would adopt my *tia* when I would go do interviews as a police reporter, because you know that's intimidating. The hardest part of being a reporter back in my police days was going to knock on the door of someone who had just lost a loved one, and usually to some kind of violent incident, be it a shooting or a car accident or a deadly fire. It was always some kind of trauma related incident and to go talk to people when they are at their lowest point was to me one of the most intrusive parts of the job. And I would have to gather myself and say, "Hey I have to do this. I got to go get the story."

But I think what I would bring to the table was also my dad's empathy. My dad was a really sweet soul. He was just a really funny guy. Everybody loved him. He was a jokester. That's what I would draw upon and I think that's what would get me get the interviews, because I could show empathy to the people I was interviewing, and I think they could see that. I wasn't just a vulture swooping in to put a notepad in their face.

AGUILAR: Did you ever tell your parents that? When your father was alive? I know he passed away.

LOPEZ: No, no, and that's a big regret. But when I covered the Dallas School District,

they interviewed me for some project and it was in Spanish, and I played the interview for them and I think I did talk about some of these issues, the experiences and lessons I learned from them. The one thing that stuck with my mother is that I credited her father, my grandfather, with my love for reading.

Every weekend we would go to Reynosa where her parents lived. Every weekend my dad got off of work, we'd cross over and we would come back on Sunday. I was an only child and there were no other kids to play with, so I was quite the book worm. My grandfather would read to me from Spanish comic books. My favorite was *Memín Pinguín*. It was a very interesting comic book, because it was about four young boys and one was black. He was the protagonist, *Memín*. He lived with a single mom. He had three friends and they would get into trouble. But it was very curious, because I really feel that I got a lot out of it, in terms of diversity. They would explore that *Memín era negrito* and there was discrimination against him.

My grandfather Victor is the one who taught me to read in Spanish. I learned how to read in Spanish before I learned how to read in English.

AGUILAR: You became an American citizen in 2008. When you were a child did you know you were not a US citizen? How did that impact you as a child?

LOPEZ: I did. I always felt different from my classmates. Back then they used to divide us into groups of students with the same reading and skill levels. My first year I was among mostly Latinos, but my second grade year they moved me into an upper class, and it was predominately white.

AGUILAR: Are you here on a green card?

LOPEZ: Yes I came here legally. My parents had already been in the US but they were going back and forth between Mexico, Washington and California. I was born in Mexico.

My parents did not have the forethought (laughs) to have me on the US side. They crossed me over at two months, legally. I had my green card. So I'm here on a green card, legally, but I did know that people would make fun of *mojaditos*.

AGUILAR: Which is wetbacks?

LOPEZ: Wet backs. And I knew I wasn't a *mojadita*, but people could still apply that to me since I was not born in the US.

AGUILAR: You knew that but did they know that?

LOPEZ: No, but I knew it. I thought my family was the only one who spoke Spanish at home. Later I realized I wasn't the only one, but I felt like I was the only one. In the seventh grade, for some reason I don't know why or what the purpose for it was, but it has obviously stayed with me, they wanted to do some kind of accounting of students. I guess they were trying to get to the issue of immigrants. They went around in homeroom and wanted everybody to answer where we were born.

AGUILAR: How old are you at the time?

LOPEZ: I'm in the seventh grade and I'm twelve or thirteen years old. And I remember being very stressed out at the moment, because people were going to learn my secret. That I'm not an American citizen. Look I'm already getting all emotional about.

This was my coming out. People are going to know that I am not a US citizen and I thought I was going to be opened to ridicule. *Hay es una mojadita* or whatever. So they are going row by row and I'm like do I lie, you know, (voice cracks) do I just say Edinburg. I didn't, I said Reynosa which does not have a good connotation in the Valley. I couldn't even have been born in some exotic Mexican city, no it was Reynosa, a border town.

I braced and said, “Reynosa, Mexico.”

And then one of the kids next to me said, “You were born in Mexico?”

And I said, “Yes.”

He was like, “Wow! You speak better English than us.” (laughs) And I was like okay, I got through this and it never came up again. No one ever treated me any differently, but I was always afraid that they would and that I would be called names. “Wetback.”

AGUILAR: You said that you got interested in journalism when you were a freshman in high school. Tell me about that.

LOPEZ: I liked reading, I think because I’m an only child, so no siblings to play with.

AGUILAR: What did you like to read?

LOPEZ: Anything really. For some reason I was a big fan of Nancy Drew and these brothers who are detectives, the Hardy Boys. And I think as reporters we are detectives. I read a lot of Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew and I think that instilled an early sense of what is right and wrong and helping people to make things right. And just the investigative and inquisitive, curious kind of things they did. I picked that up from those types of books. I would escape into those kinds of books.

I always did very well in English classes and grammar. Teachers would ask you to write a one page essay, and I would write a three page essay. (laughs) I knew I liked writing. I knew I was okay at it and I knew I had things to say. I knew I didn’t know how to control my writing. Am I making sense? I’m just writing streams of consciousness at that young age.

When I took my first journalism class, Reporting One as a freshman in high school that's when our teacher taught us about the inverted pyramid. And suddenly it was like—whoa! It's a road map. It helped me organize my writing.

I joined the student newspaper my sophomore year. So I have been meeting one newspaper deadline or another since I was a sophomore in high school. We were lucky that in Edinburg we had a student newspaper and we produced it every other week.

And another thing I liked right away was that we could go off campus to talk to people or sell ads for the student newspaper. That's another thing I loved about being a reporter, that our office wasn't an office. We were out in the world exploring and meeting people and talking to people and telling their stories. So that was another thing I loved about this career, that you were not going to be behind a desk all day long. You get to go out and do interesting things.

AGUILAR: Everyday.

LOPEZ: Everyday. This is why I love the police beat. I always tell people that before I retire, I want to go back and be a police reporter again. I really do. Just because, again getting out into the community and really talking to people, and I think I have benefited so much from being an editor that I think I could be an even better reporter now than I was 15 years ago.

AGUILAR: Here you are ready to graduate from high school. You knew you needed to stay local, because you parents could not afford to send you to college.

LOPEZ: My parents could not afford UT Austin and the whole room and board. I was lucky we had Pan American University in my hometown. And lucky I was an only child, because my parents didn't have a lot, yet they could dote on me a lot since I was the only

one, so I had car when I was fifteen. It was a used car, but I had a car.

When I turned fourteen I asked for a typewriter and my parents were able to buy me an electric typewriter. (laughs) I had a big chunky electric typewriter.

So I was fortunate in that sense that even though we didn't have a lot we had enough for one child and for everything I could possibly want. I grew up feeling very solidly middle class because I knew I had things that many of my classmates didn't have.

Pan Am was good to me. I was lucky that there was a very strong student newspaper and I was lucky to get on the student staff my sophomore year. It was also the first time I got paid for being a reporter because I could do it as part of student work study.

AGUILAR: What kind of stories would you cover?

LOPEZ: I really loved my college experience because we had a great student advisor who pushed us to be inquisitive, and curious and to hold the university accountable. She instilled that sense of watchdog journalism. I can remember taking on the university on a variety of tasks like how are they spending our student fees. One memorable incident involved students getting paid on time. Because we were all on work study on the newspaper staff and Spring break was coming up and they were having some issues and they were not going to pay us until after Spring break. We launched these stories and editorials. We were relentless for three weeks. Finally, the president called me and the managing editor. I was the editor. He said, "What do we have to do to make this right?" And we said, "You need to pay us on time," and they did.

That's when I learned the power of what we do as journalists. That we could have this kind of impact. That we can bring about change. That we could point out that this was unfair to the students who rely on the work study paycheck.

AGUILAR: Did you have a mentor in college?

LOPEZ: I have been lucky to have good people to help me along and one of them was Jim Mathis. He was the editor of the Edinburg Daily Review which was my hyperlocal newspaper. It was a daily paper, which is becoming increasingly rare in small towns. They publish like once a week mostly, but he was putting out a daily paper with a circulation of about 7-thousand.

Jim Mathis was fearless. He was a great journalist. He worked in Houston. He was in the press corp riding behind President Kennedy when Kennedy was shot in Dallas. He was bonafide. He ran the paper as watchdog journalism.

I first applied to the Edinburg Daily Review straight out of high school. I had won a few UIL competitions. I went in very hopeful. He basically told me that it was a tough business and that it was very hard and odds were I would not succeed at it.

AGUILAR: How old were you?

LOPEZ: I was 17-years-old. I had just graduated from high school. And he super discouraged me and I remember leaving and crying and thinking Oh my God what am I going to do. What if I don't make it in this? It was the only thing I wanted to do.

I was very discouraged but a few weeks later I learned he hired a classmate of mine who was on the student newspaper with me. I'm not going to say I was better than her, but I knew I was as good as she was. I knew that all things being equal, we were pretty much the same and somehow she got a job and I was told you're probably not going to make it.

I kind of stored that away and at the end of the day it did not discourage me, because I found my way on to the student newspaper at Pan Am and started flourishing there. I put it behind me.

Fast forward and I think I'm a junior at Pan Am and the AP Bureau Chief, John Lumpkin and David Sedeño, an AP reporter, they came to speak to our student staff and they encouraged us to apply for an AP internship. So I did but I didn't get it. But Lumpkin was very good friends with Jim Mathis and told Jim Mathis, "There is a young girl at Pan Am that you really need to reach out to and see if you can help her start along. Maybe have her work at the paper. She's really good and she shows a lot of promise."

Out of the blue one day, Jim Mathis calls me up and offers me to come work for him ten hours a week, after school and the weekends.

AGUILAR: How long after he told you— you wouldn't succeed in the business?

LOPEZ: This is about three or four years later. I never brought it up to him and he didn't bring it up to me. To this day, I don't know if Mr. Mathis made the connection that I was the young lady he discouraged versus the young lady he offered a part time reporting job too.

But here's the thing, by the end of that first semester, I'm doing work for them. I'm coming in on Saturdays. I'm doing reporting.

AGUILAR: Are you still in college?

LOPEZ: I'm going to Pan Am and working on the student newspaper and then the professional paper after classes. After about the first semester that I am there he (Mathis) calls me into his office one day and he basically tells me that he created a scholarship in such a way that I was the only one who qualified for it. And he paid for my last two years of school.

Not just that though, but he was also a wonderful mentor and he really taught me a lot.

Sometimes our work is not that easy. Our work sometimes requires a lot of patience, a lot of doggedness and a lot of dead time, too. We're standing out there for hours waiting for something to happen or to talk to someone. Again it's like detectives you know. You're staking someone out. Right? You do stake outs.

I remember when they had changed the seat belt law and it was now mandatory and required (to wear one) and he (Mathis) wanted to know how many people were following the law. He only had an editor and two reporters. And he put us on opposite ends of downtown in Edinburg and he asked us to look, just eyeball and count people. Are people wearing their seatbelts? I was out there at least an hour. When along comes the Chief of Police not wearing his seatbelt. (laughs) And that to me taught me that sometimes you think you're getting sent out do a nothing assignment, but you have to follow through with it as best as you possibly can. And I was looking and I caught the Chief of Police riding without his seatbelt. It was wonderful and I got a page one story for the next day and the Chief acknowledged that he was not wearing his seatbelt and he needed to do better.

AGUILAR: It does teach you how to beat the pavement for a story?

LOPEZ: You have to put in the long hours to get that interview or to get that final bit of information that really elevates your story and gives you that extra hook that you need.

AGUILAR: What was it inside you that said, "I can do this?"

LOPEZ: I knew I was good. I knew that I could write and I knew I had what was necessary to be a good reporter. I felt like this was what I was meant to do. My fall back would have probably been teaching, but I was meant to be a reporter. I'm meant to go tell people stories.

AGUILAR: How do you come out of it when someone says you are not meant to do this?

LOPEZ: I think you just have to dig deep and just not let somebody else dictate your life for you or the parameters of your skills and your talent and you just have to push forward.

AGUILAR: You've been flexible in your career. Has that been part of your success?

LOPEZ: It took a lot for me to leave the Valley, because of my family ties. But I had already been working at the *Edinburg Daily Review*, so I already had gotten a taste of real journalism. I knew that was what I was going to do and I also knew that I needed to leave the Valley. If I was going to take my career to the next level, because it would have been easy to stay in the valley and go work for the McAllen Monitor or even the Brownsville Herald, which are the two bigger papers in the valley. But I knew I wanted to go bigger than that.

One thing I did know was that I wanted to work at the *Dallas Morning News* because it had that reputation of being the paper of the Southwest. I knew I probably wouldn't leave Texas, because I needed to be close so I could drive to see my family. *The Dallas Morning News* was what I was shooting for but I didn't know early on how I was going to get there. I knew I needed to get out of the valley.

I was a junior or about to be a senior when some group had a minority internship weekend conference at UT Austin and my school paid for me to attend it. It was a conference, but it was also one whole day where editors from all over Texas were interviewing for internships. I interviewed with a bunch of people like *El Paso Times*, *San Antonio Light*, *San Antonio Express News*, *Dallas Morning News*, by that Friday night the Express News offered me a post graduate internship.

I want to say I was the first person to get a job offer from the group. The Express News editor asks, "When are you going to graduate?" This was in the Spring of '85, because I

graduated in December of '86. He asked me when are you going to graduate? And I said, "I should be done in about a year in December of '86." And he said, "Ok well you have a job waiting for you in January of '87." So for a whole year I have this job offer and I didn't say a thing to my parents. I never even told them.

AGUILAR: Why?

LOPEZ: Because I was afraid they were going to figure it out, that I would be leaving them, and say you're not going.

AGUILAR: You mean talk you out of it?

LOPEZ: Yes I think I told them like maybe a month before. I want to say I lied and made it sound like I had just gotten them offer, even though I had it in my back pocket for months.

I sat them down and I told them I had this great opportunity and I said it's only for a year. I have a place to go stay at right away. And my parents were like, "Why can't you get a job here. Why doesn't the Daily Review hire you. You're already working for them. Why do you have to go?"

It was hard to explain to them that if I really wanted to make this a career I needed to leave to a bigger paper. That the experience I was going to get here (Express News) was going to be better than any experience I was going to get staying at the Daily Review.

I said I already accepted. I kept telling my parents I'll be back in a year. I totally lied to them to make them think it's just a year.

AGUILAR: But you were convincing yourself too?

LOPEZ: Yes, I convinced myself it was just a year and it was my sink or swim. This is where I was going to find out if I really have what it takes or am I going to come back home and be content working at the local newspaper. I showed up here (Express News) in January of '87.

AGUILAR: You had an internship and did they say you have a full-time job after the internship?

LOPEZ: Yes. The paper was in a little bit of trouble at the time. They needed to increase their number of minority hires. They had gotten in trouble with the EEOC over it so they were really trying to bring up the numbers.

AGUILAR: Because it was predominately white?

LOPEZ: Yes. So they started this minority internship program where they were bringing in two minorities every six months for about three years. So there were about ten of us.

Back then we were flush with reporters. Back then we'd do about three obits a day, so I was doing a lot of obits and weather stories. I don't mind obits, and I tell this to young reporters, people think that obits are not worth your time but when you are starting off, obits can teach you so much, like accuracy and the importance of accuracy. Because if you get this person's obit wrong, that's it. People back then would clip them out. It's a memory for these families and you get something wrong in there and it's like OMG how do you apologize that.

It taught me about interviewing people when they may not be in the mood to be interviewed. It taught me a lot about the interviewing process and to get people to tell you something that's going to make their loved one's life interesting. And to give their life value.

So any opportunity I had I was pitching stories to the state editor, because all I knew was the Valley. He thought I was a go getter, and not sitting waiting to get an assignment. I was pitching stories to him. I was doing them by phone. I was getting good interviews with the right people. I think I did a few stories for him.

Then he had an opening on the state desk and I was only eight months into the internship when he requested me and got me to be on the state desk. The state desk back then was only six people. I had the southern counties, but the beat also included the valley. And it came with a take-home car. (laughs) I had a 1987 Ford Mustang with dolby stereo. That first week I got two traffic tickets. I was doing a lot of driving.

Honestly, I was not ready for it. I did okay. But if I had the experience I have now, I would have really kicked butt.

AGUILAR: Do you ever think you got this job because you were Hispanic?

LOPEZ: No, I really think I got the job because I was pitching stories to him. I would pitch stories to him and I would produce them and they were good. I was showing ambition and I was producing.

I did end up in features, but that was not my forte. I love hard news.

About that time I read Edna Buchanans "The Corpse had a Familiar Face." She was a police reporter at the Miami Herald and she wrote these books — where she told all these stories from her beat and I thought, oh my God I want to be a police beat reporter. That's when I knew this is what I am meant to do.

I went to talk to the editor and said I've had fun in features, but I really would like to try police reporting. And back then it was predominately men — all these white guys. And he said, "Well maybe we'll start you on the police blotter and give you a chance there." Police blotter back then was writing little blurbs from the police reports and it was

not what I wanted to do. I wanted to be out in the field.

AGUILAR: How was it breaking in because I know some of those reporters were tight with the cops.

LOPEZ: I knew a city editor at the (San Antonio) Light because he was dating a reporter here (Express News). He had an opening for night cops reporter and she told him, "You know Nora always keeps talking about working cops and you should approach her." And he did. It was a night cops beat and I was like, "I'll do it. I'll take it"

So I went to work for the San Antonio Light. And now I am competing against the police reporters here. It was hard and the first time I got a scoop over the Express News, it was great.

I started reporting on the police union president. I got documents and showed all this questionable spending. And I only lasted on the night beat for a few months, they wanted me to come in earlier in the day to do more enterprise.

AGUILAR: So then the Light folds. Then what?

LOPEZ: The announcement is made in the Fall of '92 that the Light is closing. First they told us that Hearst has bought the Express News and we erupt in cheers. We thought we won the newspaper war, and then they tell us we're going to close the Light and we're going to keep the Express News and that's because the Express has a larger circulation. Hearst owned the Light and they bought the Express News from Rupert Murdoch.

AGUILAR: So you're left without a job.

LOPEZ: Yeah, I'm out of a job. But I finally have the right clips to get the Dallas Morning News' attention. I ended up in Dallas and stayed there for seven years. From '93 to

2000.

AGUILAR: Did you find other challenges there?

LOPEZ: That was probably the scariest time for me and yes, I was in a huge city—I was *solita*. I had nobody in Dallas. It was good, because I was focused on the job. I was all about the job. That's really why I never married, because I was married to that job. It was my gang coverage on the police beat that got me noticed by my editors there. I was going out in these communities and I was talking to the gang bangers.

AGUILAR: You eventually moved back to San Antonio.

LOPEZ: I was getting homesick. When I left San Antonio I told myself, I'm going to go and learn from the big city editors and reporters, I'll stay there three to five years and gain as much experience as I can and come back to San Antonio. I was in Dallas seven years and my parents never once visited me in Dallas. It was a nine hour drive for them. What we would do is meet half way in San Antonio or I would go visit them.

I was driving down to the Valley for Christmas and Bob Rivard was the editor here. They had just done a big article on Bob because he was being considered for the editorship at the Miami Herald. He ended up parlaying it into talking Hearst into giving him more reporters. And I had stayed in touch with Bob, whom I knew from The Light.

I remember driving to the Valley and I stopped by here, and I knew he had openings. So I said, "I'm ready to come back."

AGUILAR: And that was it?

LOPEZ: Yes. I joined the projects team here. They knew my work ethic. I started on February 14 and within two weeks I had a page one Sunday story.

AGUILAR: Now you're the editor? Today you're the metro editor?

LOPEZ: Yes, I'm the metro editor.

AGUILAR: In the hierarchy of the newspaper, where is your position?

LOPEZ: The metro editor usually oversees the largest department within the newspaper. You have got metro, sports, feature section and you got the business section. Metro is traditionally the largest of those sections, because we cover everything: city hall, schools, courts, specialty beats like environment, transportation.

AGUILAR: Do you see women of color in these kinds of positions?

LOPEZ: Not many. My immediate boss who left us, Jamie Stockwell. She's Latina. I think she's the only one that I knew of. I can think of women in leadership roles, but not Latinas.

AGUILAR: As a woman and a Latina you've broken through to management. It must feel like a huge responsibility.

LOPEZ: It's really huge, because you caught me on a day where I am in charge today. Our editor is gone today. I'm basically the second in command for the paper now and that's only been six months. It feels empowering and I think back at my time at this paper as a little intern (laughs) writing obits and weather stories, and now here I am making the call on what will be on page one tomorrow.

AGUILAR: You have healthy experience that prepared you for this job, right?

LOPEZ: I feel very prepared. I've now been back in San Antonio 18 years, but those

seven years I was here as a reporter working the beat, working the police beat. I feel like all of that gave me a real good grounding. So I feel like I have institutional knowledge about our community that helps in this kind of position to where you have to judge stories on relevancy, but also on what resonates with our readers. That goes back to having the knowledge of this city and the stories and issues that have been big in the past that have received a lot of intense coverage and how you see it come back around again.

And if you would have told me when I walked in here as an intern in 1987 that someday I would be making these decisions, I would not have believed you.

AGUILAR: Really?

LOPEZ: I don't think so. I don't know, maybe. I always knew I wanted to be an editor, but I always said I didn't want to be deep into management, because I think that takes you away from the reporting, from the real journalism.

My dream had always been to become metro editor, but I always said I don't think I want to rise much higher than metro editor, because I think it's a job that keeps you grounded in the day to day journalism. You're still interacting with the reporters, and getting the briefings from them or they're calling you, because something is happening and they need to decide what to do and they are calling you for guidance.

Once you get further up. It's more about budgeting and are we making our goals, are we making our numbers, and it's less about journalism. I always said metro editor is what I want to do.

AGUILAR: In 2008, you became an American citizen. It's now 11 years ago. Take me back, because I know when you become an American citizen it is a big deal. What was it like for you to finally become a citizen?

LOPEZ: I could have become a US citizen at the age of fourteen or so. I was a legal resident and when you turn fourteen that's about the time you can apply for legal residency or that's how it was back then. And I never did it, and sometimes I would pick up the application and I would look through it and there was stuff in it that I was like this doesn't apply to me, because I already feel like I'm an American.

Then I started to tell myself that I'm a journalist and I should be unbiased. So by not being a citizen I can totally be unbiased because I can't vote anyway in politics. So if I want to work covering politics, nobody can accuse me of anything because I'm not even a citizen and I can't even vote.

I told myself those kinds of things for a long time. I would pick up the application, and it would say, "Are you a communist?" And again I would be like these things don't apply to me. So a couple of times I picked up the application and never went through with it.

But about 2006 or so I started to notice the anti-immigration fever that started to materialize and then it got louder and louder and that's when I thought I need to become a citizen. I need to be involved and I need to be part of the process and I can't hide and say it makes me a more unbiased journalist. On the contrary, it keeps me from being super involved.

I connected it back to my parents who became citizens before I did. It's that whole issue that here are my parents, legal residents, not able to vote on issues that really impact them. They pay taxes but have no say in who's the mayor or who's the school board making decisions about the money that they are handing over to them to educate me and other children. I started to think I need to do something and that's why I did it.

I think I was also caught up in the excitement of the first African-American to run for president, Obama, and the first woman to run for president and that was Hillary. I voted in the primary that featured Hillary and Barack. That was my first primary.

AGUILAR: Was it a big accomplishment for you to become an American citizen or did you go through the motions?

LOPEZ: It was a big accomplishment and very special because my colleague, Veronica Flores, she was the metro editor at the time, made it special. Another reporter also born in Mexico, he and I were getting our citizenship at the same time. After Veronica learned we had passed the exam and we were waiting to take the oath, unbeknownst to me, she reached out to a federal judge here and he came and did the ceremony on the patio. So myself and Jeorge Zarazua were sworn in with all the newsroom in attendance. My parents came up for it. It was very special.

AGUILAR: What scares you about journalism today? We've heard about the layoffs. Your paper has had layoffs. When it comes to layoffs is it hard for management?

LOPEZ: It has been very hard for me because I actually have not had a say in who gets laid off. I don't know if that is by design or what, but usually has been the very high up managers who make the call. Honestly, a lot of it is driven by salaries or who has been here too long, and it's a benefit to give them severance package. It's really more about that.

Sometimes really good talented people are laid off, and it's not because they weren't doing a good job, it's because the numbers add up a certain way or they had a particularly high salary. It's those kinds of things.

You feel helpless. I felt helpless this past summer when we had some layoffs and we laid off some amazingly talented people that if the decision would have been left up to me, I would have fought for them to not get laid off.

AGUILAR: How do you encourage college students to get in the field when they hear about all the recent layoffs at newspapers?

LOPEZ: I think more than ever there is a role for news gathering. I don't think that's necessarily newspapers, because what's changing is how we deliver the news. The need for independent journalists to be sussing out the important stories of the day and be the watchdog of the community, all those traditional things that many of us, at least in my generation got into this business for, I think those remain.

What is changing is how we get that information to the public. What's also changing though is that you have a lot of everyday average people who are empowered because of social media and Youtube to be citizen journalists. More power to them. I believe everybody should have a form to express their opinions and thoughts.

The problem is that these are not trained journalists. The potential then becomes that you are not getting factual information. You're getting opinion and it's being mistaken as fact, when it's just opinion.

AGUILAR: That's why we need the student journalists?

LOPEZ: Yes, that's why we need them, because they are getting the education and training to be a good investigative, informative and unbiased reporter. I know it feels like it's getting harder and harder for unbiased reporting. You know you have all these 24 hour news outlets and I don't know that people realize that actual news only comes in little segments. And in between they have all these fillers that is not news. It's talking heads, each with their own opinion, and they're pushing their own agenda. I don't know that people realize these are non-journalists. These are commentators.

We have ethical boundaries that are instilled in us in journalism schools. Getting the other side of the story. Getting both sides and making that extra effort to get somebody's side of the story. We make every effort not to just report one person's point of view.

We're trained to be unbiased. I think it's harder and harder to be unbiased. I worry about Facebook, and Twitter. Some of our reporters...

We all have our own biases and the lenses through which we all look at different things, but there is having it and then there is acting on it, and pushing stories that only reflect one point of view. I try to showcase stories on Facebook, and I do it sparingly, that have more of a wider appeal, but aren't necessarily political.

AGUILAR: What is the end goal here in your career? Do you become editor-in-chief or do you want to go back to reporting or retire in a few years?

LOPEZ: That's a good question. I didn't plan to suddenly be second in charge at the paper and the decision making that goes along with that, but now I think why not? So we'll see.