

***“It’s not really about boxing, it’s about investing.
When a kid is messing up, do we just let them go?
Or do we give them another chance and continue...”***

Sylvia Del Raso
Board Treasurer
Chicago Youth Boxing Club

Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence
Interview No. 13
May 13, 2019



Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative

The Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative (CGVRC) Graduate Student Fellowship brings together student fellows (graduate students from Chicago-based universities) and faculty fellows (professors and public health professionals) to address gun violence by conducting change-oriented research in partnership with Chicago communities.

To learn more about the CGVRC, please visit us at: <https://www.cgvrc.org>

Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence

Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence project allowed CGVRC Graduate Student Fellows to conduct stakeholder interviews, gaining a diverse perspective on local gun violence and organizational efforts to prevent it. The CGVRC was funded through support from Sinai Urban Health Institute, the Shure Charitable Trust, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and United Way of Metropolitan Chicago.

Biography: This interview is with Sylvia Del Raso. She is Board Treasurer the Chicago Youth Boxing Club. This interview was done as part of the Chicago Gun Violence Research Collaborative Graduate Student Fellowship series, *Perspectives on Chicago Gun Violence*. This interview has been edited for length and clarity

CGVRC Fellow: Could you tell us a little bit about who you are, how long you've lived in the city, and what is your connection with any community in the city?

Sylvia: So, I am on the board of directors with the Chicago Youth Boxing Club, I am also a member of La Villita Community Church. I've been in this neighborhood, Little Village, for over 50 years, I came from Mexico, my parents brought me when I was 4 years old in 1969. I grew up here, went to grammar school and high school. I went to UIC for one year and then I got married. I currently work as a service operation support specialist for the United States Postal Service.

CGVRC Fellow: What is your connection to this church and the boxing gym, how long have you been affiliated with these organizations?

Sylvia: With the church, I've been here for 16 years. But I've known the pastor since we were in grammar school. I was twelve and he was nine years old. Our parents started going to the same church and we became friends. Unfortunately, he just passed away.

But we're continuing, you know. Pastor Victor asked me to join the board of the boxing club, I am on the administrative board of the church, and he asked me if I would join because they needed someone to help them with the bookkeeping and things like that. So, I did, even though I didn't want to deal with boxing.

But I soon started to see the difference between the kids in the neighborhood because we did have an afterschool program, at the church, where we would help the kids with their homework. We had difficulties with some of them, they were violent you know. I had one of the kids up on the 3rd floor. Because he was just being...terrible. Out of control, that was the only way I could control him, and he joined the boxing program, and he came one day, and I walked down the stairs and he called me mam... and I was like what? Where did this kid come from?

So, when the pastor asked me to join the board, I said I'll give it a try, you know even though I didn't like boxing. But I liked what it was doing with the kids, and that same little boy, I mean he walked away from fights, out on the park, on the streets. Whereas before, he was the instigator. He was the one, and you talk to him, and you know he got the chance to go to a couple competitions, he placed 4th in the nationals. For silver gloves. I asked him, you know, what's going on and he's like, it's not the same thing anymore. It's no longer a challenge to fight these kids out here.

CGVRC Fellow: Interesting. It's like at that point you become above it in like a literal, and physical sense. Right?

Sylvia: Correct, and you know talking to the mentors, and the coaches. Let them know you know that behavior is not acceptable anymore, you know, you get in trouble, and you're out of the boxing program. And we have wonderful coaches.

One of our head coaches was a professional boxer himself, he got injured. He loves boxing. So, when the gym opened, he came in and volunteered. He volunteered for a year. And then we kind of took over and, I mean the boxing program wasn't part of the church at all. It was an off-the-street boxing program that didn't have a space to practice. Someone from the neighborhood said, hey this church has a gym maybe you can use it. And so when he approached the pastor, he loved the idea and when he brought it to the church, the church did not like the idea too much.

Because they said you know, boxing is violent, why would we want to have that in the basement? So, it took a little bit of talking to people and convincing them. We said, hey we're going to get the kids here, and they'll be here, instead of out in the streets. We'll be teaching them you know, things that like, discipline, skills, leadership, and just things like that. Here we are, you know, ten years later. Now the church is the biggest fan. They come out and support, for all events, and volunteer for the cooking and everything that comes with it.

CGVRC Fellow: Right, how many kids can take advantage of the boxing program?

Sylvia: We have 140 kids in the program, but not all at the same time. Not all at once, thank gosh for that...it gets chaotic at times when it gets busy. We have another gym upstairs on the third floor. It is a basketball court.

So...You know, we improvise. Stairs, it's four floors going up and down, so a lot of running the stairs, around the block, you know there's never been an issue with any of our kids. Kids walk around with their hands wrapped, so they know they're boxers. They don't mess with them. Never had an issue.

CGVRC Fellow: What kind of involvement do the parents to the kids have?

Sylvia: You know, this is a sport where a lot of the fathers get involved and the mothers less. And it's the explanation of they don't get in the ring, you know, it's a lot of conditioning before you get into the ring. Kids have about 6 months before they get into the program and it's just light sparring. If the coaches see that they have potential, then they can spar with others, and then if they want to go into competition, it's totally different training. Now it's more intense, now you must come in everyday, a couple hours every day...then it's like what do you want to do, weight loss, competition, that sort of conversation with the parents, they get more involved and then it's like well if they go into competition then they have to meet weights and you have to watch what they eat.

So now the moms get more involved in the kid's eating habits. Because now they have to watch what they eat, you travel to Missouri, and now the kids are overweight, and it's like you know, they can't compete. Then the coaches are struggling trying to get them up at 5 AM every day running. Yeah, and just conditioning them for the competition. So, it becomes more involvement and even with things that we do here in the church, the moms like to volunteer and help when we have little potlucks, the kids after their competitions, you know, we give them awards...certificates and things to you know encourage their accomplishments and so they can represent CYBC.

So we talk to them and say you represent us, do a good job. Then we have the teachers calling, if they know the kids belong to the boxing program, they call and say hey I'm having problems with this guy or that guy, he's not coming in or he started to hang out with the wrong kids, you know?

CGVRC Fellow: How did you make those connections? Was it kind of that the kid would represent as part of the boxing group?

Sylvia: That and our board president – his wife was a teacher so there is a link there. So, then it's like, the lead math teacher. She would call and say hey you know this kid is acting up and not turning in his homework. Then we have a sit down, with the coaches and they ask what's going on and why they are not doing their homework.

Right, and then when we go to competitions, and they ask for permission. In December they went to Salt Lake City for a week. We had 5 kids that competed there. One of the teachers wasn't too happy cause you know one of the kids wasn't doing too well in school, so, ok, what do we do? What can we do to help? This competition was something that he had to complete for him to be considered for the Olympic team in 2020.

CGVRC Fellow: And then you try to balance the academics with that, so, we invested in Chromebook and laptops to have them turn in their homework, we have had interventions with a parent, who is like the kids not going to be able to go, why not? Then, present the case, sit down and try to talk it out...See but there's a lot of involvement with the parents and the coaches, and the kids feel supported.

Sylvia: We let them know, hey we're not afraid of saying I love you. You walk in, you see the environment, it's like they all greet each other with a handshake. You know? Even amongst themselves, the kids, the boys, they don't shy away from that. You ask them, what do you like about the boxing club? And they say it feels like family.

CGVRC Fellow: What would you say the percentage of – the group that has good family support versus those who find their family support at the gym?

Sylvia: That's a good question, I'm going to say about 45 from both families, both parents in the household. We have a lot of kids here that the moms bring them in because the dads got deported, they're in Mexico. It's up to the mom to try to be the mom and the dad, and to figure all of that out. And you know, they have issues – emotional issues. They are angry with society, with what is going on.

Things like that, the moms working two jobs to try to help make ends meet and then it's like, come over and bring some here, they had a little hallway, they would sit there for a couple hours and take a little nap because they're tired – just a lot of those stories. And you have a lot of kids that are trying to do well but the family environment – their parents were old gang members, you know?

CGVRC Fellow: You mentioned earlier that the kids will go running around the block with their hands wrapped. Is that something that you guys say to them to do? Or is it something that they just kind of did?

Sylvia: Well, they'll come in and they'll wear hand wraps. When they start sparing, just for protection, for their hands and stuff like that...so they come in and they've wrapped their hands and stuff like that and we found out that local kids, local boxers, oh you don't want to mess with them and stuff like that.

CGVRC Fellow: So, it's part out of respect for them for doing something else. That they are not looking for trouble and also that they could give you trouble if you mess with them, right?

Sylvia: Exactly.

CGVRC Fellow: So, that's good. That is giving them skills to defend themselves.

Sylvia: Yeah, because a lot of the kids that come in are very soft-spoken. One of the young ladies in the program, she's been here about 4-5 years already. She came here, she could barely speak, you know. But she had good leadership skills and so, about 3 years ago we gave her a leadership award, and she was just beaming, so we just, we are recently hiring them because we see that, a lot of the kids we lose right after high school. Either we lose them the bad way or we lose them going into college or going into the military or anything like that. But, we want to capture those kids that are not going to college. What are they doing with their lives? We have 4 positions right now with AmeriCorps that we were able to obtain.

And so, we talk to them about what AmeriCorps is, the value of it, and about giving back to the community, and you know, it's not a well-paying job.

CGVRC Fellow: It's a resume builder, for sure. So, we just interviewed her Thursday, it was like the best interview that I have been a part of. She was well spoken, she was prepared, her resume was good. She had on there that she had received a leadership award.

Sylvia: Well, you know like, they just forget about the boxing club or some of them join gangs unfortunately. Because they're here and they're like where do you go from here?

CGVRC Fellow: Is there an age limit?

Sylvia: No, we don't have an age limit, but we have another program called, after school matters, the name of the program is "Ring Leaders." So, we have 30 kids in the program so after senior year they age out of that program. So, they could be in that program for the 4 years of high school but after that what happens to them, they don't want to go to college, and that's why I say we lose them.

It's our new generation, what is our new generation going to be like, me working with the postal service and seeing all the new hires that we have, they struggle so much because these kids are not prepared at all. Not at all. They don't know the concept of clocking in and out on time. They don't know the concept of coming into work, the consequences of not coming to work and things like that, ASM is a little bit of you know, of that big window of being hireable. You know?

CGVRC Fellow: You mentioned some of these families they see their dads get deported, are you seeing a lot of kids who are undocumented and then struggling to get a job because of their status?

Sylvia: Not so much get a job, but continue onto higher education. It's expensive and then you know lately there has been more scholarships for them, DACA students and things like that. They don't have that knowledge base. They just see it as oh I'm not legal here – just going to go get a construction job. Some years ago, we had the opportunity to go to Notre Dame they had what is called Bengal bouts. It's a 5-day boxing competition that students prepare for the whole year. It's a fundraiser so they raise funds for Bangladesh and so we were invited to go and so we were signing up kids to go for it and one of the kids signed up for it and the father came back and told me to scratch his name and I said why? Why am I going to send my son over there to this college and fill his head with dreams and he's not going to be able to go there. And I thought about it, and so I came back to the father, and I said look don't take away

this opportunity from your son, let him go because you don't know what the future holds, things could change, let him go. So, he thought about it and he came back the next day and he says ok put him back on the list. I put him back on the list and he earned a 175K scholarship. Now, those parents come back every year and they volunteer. And you know you think it's not really about boxing, it's investing, it's about when the coaches come and say hey this kid is messing up, what do we do? Do we just let them go? Or do we give them another chance and continue?

CGVRC Fellow: Well, it's interesting because you raise that idea of a threshold. So, are we done investing in this child? You're basically holding people around you accountable for that as well, it's not just their family. You're going to say at our organization at what point do we say ok this is the last straw for this kid, and I imagine that makes it much harder to declare because someone must speak up and say this is the last straw for this kid.

Sylvia: And we had that moment not too long ago...you know one of the kids he's coming in competition, every kid is different, the family lifestyle is the moms always partying, the dads always partying, It's always party, party, party. You know, he drives a car even though he doesn't have a driver's license. So, I saw him on the street one day, he's blaring the music full blast, you know I called out to him, I told him to get out of the car, I said show me your driver's license and he goes "I don't know Ms. Silvia, I don't have a driver's license" and I said why are you driving? Do you know the risk that you're taking? I said because you have the music blasting, calling attention to yourself, what do you think is going to happen if a police officer sees you?

It's that they don't have guidance in the family. So, he's doing really well, you know, he boxed, he was at the junior Olympics in Dallas, nationals. He won. He's doing really well, and the parents reward him with a car, which you know it's like he doesn't have a driver's license. He's got no insurance if he hit somebody, if he killed somebody, you know? And how do you get the parents to understand this? They're like "oh mijo, my son" you know?

So, then he's not doing so well in school, he started hanging out with the wrong kids, we get the call from the teachers. I talked to him, pastor talked to him. We have a group intervention with him. You know, 5 people from the neighborhood. Pastor, myself, board of directors, one of the local guys that does a lot of street intervention and he's like accepting everything that we are saying but then his actions are contrary to what he says. So, then coaches say I don't think we want him back. So, I say ok what do we do? So, we said ok, we'll give him one last chance, so, he comes in, we talk to him, tell him hey you have to prove yourself, you can't just barge in and barge out. We are invested in you. You can't just come and take, you have to give, and he said yeah, yeah, yeah that was it, he never showed up. So, then the coaches are like Ms. Silva we told you, we told you, but at least we tried.

I said if he doesn't succeed or whatever happens, at least we tried. We can say hey we're sorry this happened to you, but every opportunity was given to you but you just didn't take advantage of it. That doesn't mean we bail on him, but it means that now you have to suffer the consequences of your actions.

CGVRC Fellow: Do the kids that come to the gym in some instances, also have a gang affiliation? Or is that a caveat? How does that work?

Sylvia: I think it's more parents than themselves. I think some of the parents maybe don't want their kids to be, maybe go in the same way?

CGVRC Fellow: Got you, got you. So, they're finding ways to have resources.

Sylvia: Yeah, but then it's kind of hard to let go of their ways you know? Cause it's like we have rules and regulations. So, this is what I tell the coaches...hey no swearing, we don't swear here. They sign an application with all the rules and regulations. For example, no gang affiliation, no swearing. So I call attention to the coach. And they say, hey Ms. Sylvia, it's kind of hard, when they go out they're out in the street and they're cussing. When they come here, they cannot cuss. If you know they want to be out there and cuss it's ok, it's up to them with their parents. But when they're here it's unacceptable.

I had a parent the other day because he was here, you know he met up with another parent and I guess they were old gang banging buddies or whatever. So, I said if you guys want to have that conversation, please go out there, but I don't want my kids to hear that. And they say oh sorry Ms. Sylvia, sorry. So it gives me great joy when I see a kid who I know the father was an old gang banger, and he's doing really well and then I see the father of the son tearing up.

CGVRC Fellow: So, it's like a brilliant intervention...to be able to intercept there. Yeah. So, talking about violence in the neighborhood, particularly gun violence. What is your perception of gun violence in this neighborhood, Little Village?

Sylvia: So, growing up in Little Village, I was impacted by it when I was about 7-8 years old. My mom was trying to put us to sleep, I remember this really well, the next day was our first day of school, and it was hot, and in the 1970s there wasn't too many people with air conditioners. So our windows were open and just trying to get us to sleep and I remember it was around midnight or so, and all of a sudden bang, bang, bang...a lot of people would be hollering, crying and I'm trying to look out the window and she was pulling me down, get down, get down, get down and then found out that our next-door neighbor was killed. And she was a young girl who I had a little bit of a friendship with and that was my first funeral that I had ever experienced.

Until this day when I talk about it, I can recall all the details. The gun shots you know, were impactful. And you know my parents trying to get away from my neighborhood I was over there by the hospital.

CGVRC Fellow: What was the cause of the violence, do you know?

Sylvia: It was just gang bangers...that time the Satan Disciplines were very strong against the Latin Kings and even though the girl had no affiliation with any of the gangs, she was out there, it was hot, she was out there with cousins, they were on the porch, and they were shooting at each other, and she just happened to be the one that caught the bullet. I have been held up...coming from work when I used to work downtown in high school. And even I worked at a Clark gas station in Berwyn when I was in college, I got held up at gun point.

But here in the neighborhood you hear a lot about getting shot and killed you know, and I live in neighborhood, and I know the kids that are gang bangers. I know that the kids that could lose their life in any moment because of the lifestyle they're living. You know and it's sad, my husband and I chose to stay here instead of moving anywhere else because there's more in the neighborhood than just that. The gang bangers are low in population but they have the strongest voice, and I think so are the people from the outside, that's what they want to hear, they don't want to hear the good things.

Right, so you talk to people, and they say oh, Little Village and they're like "oh my God" aren't you afraid of getting shot? And I'm like you guys picture I walk out of my house and I'm dodging bullets or something you know. And it's not the case.

CGVRC Fellow: Right. You've lived here so long. Has the sentiment changed or it's just gotten louder from when you were a kid?

Sylvia: I think it's decreased a little bit, and I don't know why it exists because it's not a racial thing. It's not blacks against Latin's or anything like that. Here Little Village it's Mexican gangs against Mexican gangs.

Yeah, and I think it's just stigma that follows it's like the gang bangers on the westside think that they are better than the eastside. Because the gang bangers on the eastside are known to be poorer than the gang bangers on the westside because if you're on the westside, you have a little bit more money, you think you're better. Just stupid things even growing up in high school. Now it's a polish high school. And, you know the girls were catholic girls but they still loved hanging out with the guy gang bangers, you know?

And I never really saw any attraction to it...I thought it was stupid. I was like why? But then I never did drugs, I never smoked pot, I never did any of those things. I saw the struggle – my mom and my dad. My dad was the only one working because there was six of us. So, my dad didn't want to send us to someone else to take care of us, he told my mom why did we have all these kids if someone else is going to take care of them?

So, she stayed at home, he worked, we were very limited in our resources any stuff, but I saw my dad working. When he was sick it didn't matter, he went to work, you know? Any family affair he still had to go to work. So, I saw that sacrifice, so I was like why would I want to throw all of that away? So, I did still hang out with some of the girls that smoked or hung out with the gang bangers but you know, they would try to entice me... and I'm like nah.

It impacts the family. I had a cousin that got killed... and just the whole sadness of it. The day that my aunt passed away, it's just the impact of it. It's violent, my pastor would say there's nothing sexy about that. It traumatizes the whole family. Both, the victim and the person, you know?

CGVRC Fellow: Yeah. Do you think kids feel like they have a choice? These days? When you think about having the turf the gangs patrol and what not? Is it safety thing that brings kids into the gangs?

Sylvia: I think so because even my own family members were involved. Growing up, I don't think they got deep, deep into it. I think that they did it more out of protection for themselves to be safe more than anything else, but I think that it lures them into the money part when money comes in easily. When they start selling the drugs and all that.

So, then it's different sort of level. So, you're just a gang banger you're living on this side, and you do it to stay safe. Even the kids that stay on the same side, you either belong to us or don't belong to us. You know? But I think as you start getting deeper and deeper into it, and then drugs start coming in and then guns start coming in then you're deep into it, and you can't get out of it.

CGVRC Fellow: It's like quicksand. Do you think that a lot of people stereotypically will say, oh the violence is rooted in gangs but there's also some that might think in another phenomenon like domestic violence or economic scarcity? So, not necessarily gang violence. What do you think are the causes other than any gang affiliation?

Sylvia: You have what you have – generational curses right? So, you come from a family that has been violent, and you see your parents being...my husband prime example. His father was very violent towards my mother-in-law, I see it in his brothers. But he's not, and I ask him what changed you, he goes, I saw what he did to my mother, and the suffering that my mother went through. And I told myself that I would never want to be the cause of a woman suffering like that. So, he said I fought against it, but it was easy for me to just go into being my father because I see it in my brothers. Right, and then I mean sometimes violence is violence whether there is a gun involved or not. It could be a pot.

CGVRC Fellow: What do you think the city, is offering in terms of resources or policies that is helping this neighborhood with gun violence?

Sylvia: So, there's been a lot of you know, opportunities to apply for grants with violence but more for kids that have already been through the legal system and not so many for kids that aren't.

CGVRC Fellow: So, keeping them out of it to begin with kind of resources are needed?

Sylvia: Right.

CGVRC Fellow: What would those look like if we designed them?

Sylvia: Um just activities, programing, any sort of youth sports. And I think that's what's been working lately for us, here in Little Village. We have great basketball leagues, softball leagues, you know. Beyond the Ball is a great program. Here the church, we have the older basketball league. So, guys over 30 come and play and then on Wednesday it's the youth. So, it's a lot of just keeping them busy you know...what they say is idleness is the devil's playground.

So, when the kids come here, we don't judge them. They have tattoos, they have whatever. We don't say oh you shouldn't have done this, you shouldn't have done that. Every first Wednesday of the month we offer tattoo removal. Anyone that wants to come, and they charge twenty dollars. But it must be gang affiliated or something that will prevent you from getting a job interview. So, we have both sides of the gangs coming through they want to get rid of them.

CGVRC Fellow: That's really cool. Are there any other in that kind of venue or space, I feel like I've heard that this church has pretty good health education and intervention groups as well. Am I right about that?

Sylvia: Well, we have a domestic violence prevention program.

CGVRC Fellow: Are there resources being handed out in that space while they're getting their tattoos removed?

Sylvia: Yeah. On May 18th we have a health fair and it's HIV testing, hearing testing, some vision testing, first time buyer, first time home owner, blood pressure, blood sugar. Yeah...and we were scheduled to

have gun turn-in on that same day but because we were having so many people in the building that they decided it would be...

CGVRC Fellow: Yeah. Where do you think the guns come from in this neighborhood?

Sylvia: I think it's moms and dads finding some of the guns and turning them in when they find them on their kids, and stuff. A lot of just old guns.

CGVRC Fellow: I've heard that. Sometimes you wonder, is there enough incentive. \$100 is amazing but should it be \$500? Would it be something that would help pay rent versus something...

Sylvia: Then it would be good to have the funding to be able to do that, but you know...it's kind of limited as well.

CGVRC Fellow: When you think about, whether you fund like you said before, you have services for people who have been through the criminal justice system but not for those who are rubbing up against it? You treat the symptoms but you don't treat the cause or one of the many causes because it's not just one simple fix.

Sylvia: And then it's like when we go out for funding it's a little bit difficult for us because you know not everyone wants to fund the boxing program. They're like boxing is violent, so just changing that. And they come and they're like oh wow, it's amazing. We've had foundations come through, McCormick. Mr. Joe Madden from the cubs. His foundation just gave us \$30,000.

I'll go back to this young lady you know she would come in very violent, very bad spoken. And you wonder, oh my gosh, what kind of life is she living? You know, and then you see the father and the mother and you're like oh. I was outside one day, and she started to bring her little brother and then the kid gets out of the car, and the father yells out "and make sure that fat ass does some work..." You see how she was so embarrassed. I saw her face and I made it like I didn't hear, so, she wouldn't be embarrassed.

Now I'm so proud of her you know, she won her the golden globes in 2017. If I could show you her video of her reaction to winning and just, she had that ugly cry you know? And then she is walking out of the building one day and the pastors told her "I'm really proud of you" and she stopped midtrack and said "no one has ever told me that before". She's 16 years old and never heard of anything like that before.

So, I mean violence has been around us, here at the church. Especially with our pastor because he was so involved, he was one of the first responders to, whatever was happening down the street, kids getting shot or whatever so, I mean he was more the first person, and we were like secondary. We were like the aftercare. So, he was there primary and then let us know, then family needs this. Can't bring their son because they don't have the money. Try to raise funds for that, you know. Keeping deep into pockets to try to get this kid buried or whatever, and just the loss of the whole thing.

CGVRC Fellow: What kind of access do they have to families? Do they have some kind of traumatic processing after an event like that? Is it largely seated in their own family structures? Where do they find solace? Or where are they able to process trauma of violence?

Sylvia: So here in the community, it's very limited. I think that organizations like Enlace does well with that. They have what they call a group Padre Angeles, which is parents that have lost children to violence and then here in our church we have a couple people – Benny Estrada – who you know themselves were gang bangers when they were young. And they were from opposite sides. I don't know if you read the stories, but it was in the tribune they did a whole follow up with them. Went through you know all of the crime scenes and everything that they had to go through. If you have a chance, check it out.

CGVRC Fellow: If you could put any resource in the community right now, what would it be?

Sylvia: That! Trauma, trauma center. I would say counseling services. A lot of that. A lot of the churches, sad to say, are closed.

So, our church is known in the neighborhood as healing. As a healing place. If anything has ever happened in the neighborhood people just show up here. The doors are always open, the pastor has...even our elders do the same. The church going to be open from 10 to 10. Whoever wants to come through just come through, and we just sit around, and we talk. It's the community healing itself not necessarily the pastor.

CGVRC Fellow: And that's the thing...part of it really is having that authentic connection being seen by somebody, saying what you're saying, it doesn't matter who it is that's seeing you.

I'm amazed because the church in a way...we were playing poker upstairs one day. Someone opens up a can of beer...and one guy says, what kind of church is this? Let's not be hypocritical about it, you don't go home and open up a can of beer? So why can't you do it amongst friends? Right, and another guy said, you're an atheist, and you're hanging out with us, and he goes oh yeah, I guess so. So, yeah, we all serve, we all have the same heart, to serve. So, you might have a different God, you might not have a God.

CGVRC Fellow: What do you think makes people leave this neighborhood? Because I mean that sounds like a resource that anyone can tap into and feel welcome? What do you think scares people away?

Sylvia: So, I think a lot of the ones that leave are the ones that have lived that life. You know, been gang banging. Right, so my mom and my dad were here. I'm married, my husband loved the neighborhood, he came from Back of the Yards. We had the opportunity to move, wherever we wanted to. At the time, not anymore because now he works in the city, and he has to stay.

So, yeah my two brothers. Kind of had to move away, to get out of it, and my sister moved on because they got married. One went to California, the other one went to Texas, and one went to Aurora. But I stayed here because my mom and my dad were here and I did not want to let them stay by themselves.

I love it here, it's a vibrant neighborhood. You see life every day. There's a lot of good things, here. Unfortunately, some of the media only reports the bad stuff, they don't want to report the good stuff.

Sylvia: So, we got broken into, last 3 weeks, here at the boxing club.

CGVRC Fellow: I'm sorry to hear that.

Sylvia: Yeah, and I knew who it was.

CGVRC Fellow: Ok, so you were just saying you were wondering why people have some distortion in their moral compass, and you were saying.

Sylvia: To me it has a lot to do with parental. Giving responsibilities at a young age, you know my parents I knew that as soon as dinner was over, I had to wash the dishes, my sister had to clean the table and sweep.

Everyone had a responsibility, everybody contributed to the family, and as we were growing up because there were six of us, I think that as times passed things changed towards the younger ones, and they didn't have that responsibility anymore. You know, and I saw a difference, and I brought it up to my parents, why is there a difference how you treated us as to how you treat the younger ones now? Because before when I was growing up I had to be home at 11 PM. They're leaving the house at 11 PM.

CGVRC Fellow: What changed? What did they say?

Sylvia: My mom says because there were so many of you guys, we didn't have to give, and now as you guys got older, you're taking care of yourselves. Now with the younger kids we can afford to give them more, so, we gave them more.

When I was growing up, I lied about my age, to get a job. I started working when I was 15, and I said I was 16. And here are my younger brothers and sisters 20, and 21-not doing much for themselves. And talking to my peers at the postal service, you know, we are well paid employees. And so, they gave their kids their kids everything they didn't get when they were young. Now they're working at the postal service, they can't come to work because you know there's a party going on.

CGVRC Fellow: Yes, short term. Is there any assignment of gender in families at least in this neighborhood?

Sylvia: I think with the Mexican culture there is. And I only speak about our culture. I think that girls are you know um they are expected to do the housework, do the cooking, do this and do that, and I ask my father what's the difference between me and my brother as far as me being able to do something, and I can't do it but you let him do it and he's younger than me. Oh, because he's a boy. But then when I was going to school my dad bought me a car, bought my sister a car, bought my other sister a car, but he didn't buy it for the boys. And I asked him why you didn't buy one for the boys and he goes because they're boys they're supposed to earn their own car.

CGVRC Fellow: Do you think boys and girls now in this community have different connections to violence or do you think that...I mean is violence equally applied these days.

Sylvia: I think so, I think it is equally applied. I think that girls when they get into that culture are more violent than boys. I had a little bit of a glimpse the other day. I got off of work and I was going to a restaurant on 26th street and there was a couple of I don't think they were local gang bangers-I think they were from somewhere else. I think they were maybe even from California. They were smoking, they were drinking, you know like they owned the street, right. There were 2 guys, 3 girls and the girls were just like in my face like they're going to do something if I don't comply, and I said excuse me ladies,

and I walked through them because it's like I don't buy your hype. I'm not going to show you any fear because you know it's just hype.

CGVRC Fellow: Well, you sound like a boss, I wouldn't mess with you. Do you feel optimistic or pessimistic that things will improve in Chicago?

Sylvia: I feel optimistic.

CGVRC Fellow: Do you feel like we are on the right track?

Sylvia: I think that we still have a long way to go. As far as, not every neighborhood is the same. So, we need to look at every neighborhood with different eyes. To see, go and find out, listen to the people in the neighborhood and say, hey you know what you guys need? Instead of saying this is what you need.

CGVRC Fellow: Yeah, yeah. What would be the biggest indicator that things are getting better?

Sylvia: I think when you involve the people in the community. If you seek for that wisdom from the people who live here. I think that she has a good transition team. You know I was very surprised to see the people there. Which is good, shows me that she really, she has an open mind.

CGVRC Fellow: So, an investment in what the community really wants versus paternally telling them.

Sylvia: Right.

CGVRC Fellow: And let's say things turned around and there was less gun violence, how would you see that manifesting in your community, how would you know that things are getting better in terms of violence? What would be the proof of a successful policy for you?

Sylvia: Probably just hearing less you know...that's amongst the young kids, you know. With my, the people that I work with you know, when things happen, we hear about it right away. And I mean you know you just don't see these kids out on the street when they're supposed to be at school and then just having more successful schools, I think that the administration must change a little bit.

You know, it's, I feel that by living here I have an impact in my community. I think the biggest impact, the things that I've felt with the kids from the boxing program or the kid from the community is when I have a kid that will sit with me for a half-hour and will ask me how I'm doing, they want to know about me.

CGVRC Fellow: They develop a sense of world, outside of their own, right?

Sylvia: Right. We talk about my job at the postal service, and they want to know about it. That, and just my belief you know my belief that God has placed me here. I must do a good job. I have gifts that I want to share with them, and things like that. That keeps me grounded, keeps me humbled.

Yeah. Meeting new people like when Jackie came into the community. Being able to connect with her, and her husband. Her husband, I don't know if you know the story. He's a teacher, we met in Boston. We are at the University of Boston, we were training for coaching. I was there with the coaches, and we started talking, and then we found out he's from Chicago. He was a coach at urban initiatives.

And so, we told him about the boxing club, then he came to the boxing club, and he was a coach here, we hired him. He was a coach here, and then we talked about the church, he came to visit, and now he is one of our worship leaders'. So, they ask where you guys met, and we're like Boston.

CGVRC Fellow: So how can you help these families that are actually struggling because of structure or because of money? Is it how can we keep the families from having to work that much or is it keeping the families in the home more?

Sylvia: I think it's having the resources so when you talk to the parents here they say safe haven a lot, here in this building. So, having more of those places, you know?

CGVRC Fellow: What do you think keeps these kids from um, if you had 10 kids right, and you ask them what is your biggest obstacle in life right now, what would they say? Let's say 15-year old's.

Sylvia: I think that they would say school. It's really disheartening for us to look for a venue to do a tournament or a showcase and we must go through so much red tape, and that everybody wants to have a stake in the whole thing. Like You know we've gone to local high schools and say hey you know we're going to have this tournament you know, we're willing to pay whatever it is but they're like oh well the engineer must be there, two custodians must be there, security has to be there, and then you need to have admin there, and the admin wants \$75 an hour.

It's about community you know, six of our kids go to your school here, can we work something out, you know? And it's like, let's work things out, you know and it's like it's very disheartening because they're supposed to be here to help the kids.

CGVRC Fellow: You think there's a tension between an organization right now that gave you guys a million dollars, and you were able to get a new facility and get a whatever would the tenure and the ability of the organization to be as impactful things will change in a way that was negative because it was suddenly flush and able in ways that it struggles with now.

Sylvia: I would say, yes, because of our location. You cross Cermak you're into the bad neighborhood, right? And we're on this side where we're supposed to be the east side of the west side gang. You know, a lot of kids don't come over because we're on this side. The kids that do cross over and then they're here and then they live it here, then they'll come but it's that initial oh they're over there. So, I mean we would have to find a neutral place and even though this is, we're known as being neutral and we've had kids from both sides here. You know, upstairs playing basketball and down here as well. It's still that stigma.

So, what we do is, there is another boxing program called the block in North Lawndale, and we support them. The kids can't come over there but hey they have a contest. State Farm is going to give them \$25,000 because you know, if they get the most votes.

CGVRC Fellow: Mm-hmm. Is it easier to find a place that is in a completely different neighborhood? Like, if some place in Evanston were you can use our high school. Would that be easier to get different groups together?

Sylvia: I think so. I think that um so like we've had it at North Lawndale College Prep. We've had our tournaments there and you know, we've had a lot of people go over there because it's neutral. But if we have it at Farragut then a lot of people don't show up because it's at on the other side. But we want to keep it local.

So, we have a 3-day tournament in November, and we started here, we outgrew here, we went upstairs to the sanctuary, put in a ring in our sanctuary. You know, and there's been Sundays where the pastor preaches from the ring, which is fine, you know. But see, you see how the mindset of the people changed from the very beginning where it was like no, no, no, no. Now it's like ok the ring is here. This is what we do.

CGVRC Fellow: Right. Yeah. Well, I can't thank you enough for making the time to talk to me today.

Sylvia: Yeah! No problem. Come visit us!