Vicki Almstrum: This is an interview with Graciela Perera from Youngstown State University in Ohio conducted by Vicki Almstrum. This interview is being recorded on October 18, 2007 at Orlando, Florida. This is part of the Computing Educators Oral History project. Did we pronounce your name correctly?

Graciela Perera: Yes, you did, thank you.

V: All right. So, I’d like to start thinking about your parents and their backgrounds. Did they go to college, did they study math and science? Can you tell us a little about them?
G: Yeah, both of my parents did go to college. They were latecomers, after they got married they went to college. They graduated from journalism, both in the same career, in the humanities. They all come from humanities background.

V: Interesting. Did they study in Venezuela?

G: Yes, both of them studied in Venezuela, in a private Catholic university.

V: OK. So in your early education were you a good student?

G: Yes always … always.

V: So you liked your studies, all subjects, or were there any particular subjects that were your favorites?

G: Science, math, usually were my favorite subjects. I started early in school, because my sister—I have a bigger sister—she started school and she’s only two years apart from me. So I saw her going to school and me, trying to compete, saying, “Well if she’s going, I want to go.” I was in school when I was like three years old or something like that. And they accepted me, I was two years younger than the rest of the students, so by four or five years I was reading. But it was just because I went to school earlier, and I liked school.

V: So you mentioned your sister. Was she studying a math or science area?

G: My sister had troubles, she wasn’t a good student. She was very nice but she was never … she liked the sciences, but she was never a good student within the sciences. And she graduated, my big sister, all my sisters have bachelors degrees, and she’s a pharmacist now. Graduated in Venezuela. My younger sister—I have two younger sisters. My first younger sister that follows me has a law degree and the other younger sister is a dentist. And both of my younger sisters, I guess pushed by me going to grad school, are also getting their graduate degrees.

V: That’s fantastic. So did your parents influence you particularly, you and your sisters, on going to college, on what you might study?

G: What I studied, I knew since I was like 3, 4 years old. Engineering and computers were with me all my life. Ever since I was like 5 years old, all my toys were electronics-oriented: gaming, computers. So they knew pretty much where I was going to … They left me alone, but in my family there was an emphasis of going to college. It was very important that … my mom and dad said, “All our daughters must go to college. If we have to pay for it, great, if you get a scholarship, fine, but you all have to go to college.”

V: So it was a clear expectation from an early age …

G: Yes, yes, it was very clear.
V: And did they try to guide you in particular directions for what you would study?

G: No, they knew. They already … it was very clear. To my other sister it wasn’t as clear as I was. I knew when I was in high school … before high school, my first year of high school, I knew what I was gonna study. It was no surprise.

V: And so through high school, are there any particular mentors, any particular teachers, that helped guide you?

G: In high school there was logic. I come from a Catholic background because Venezuela … I am originally from Venezuela and that’s where I spent most of my high school years, and I come from a Catholic background, which is the only religion basically in Venezuela. And during there I met one teacher, my chemistry teacher, which influenced me a lot in teaching. And then my spiritual guide, which is a Jesuit priest, he’s now dead, but his education was in logic, and family issues, and divorce.

V: So logic from the point of view of …

G: Logical point of view, logic, like Aristotle logic, he taught …

V: Right, from the philosophy point of view.

G: From law, he used to teach law students logic. Sets, things like that. Theoretical logic.

V: So he had influence both on your way of thinking and your way of viewing the world.

G: Yes, very much. Especially the difference between man and woman. The role of man and the role of woman, how to handle relationships, personal relationships.

V: Would you like to talk a little more about that? That’s interesting.

G: Yes, he was a Jesuit priest. He was a very big authority in Venezuela. He was leading a foundation and he was in charge by the … he decided in the Catholic Church if somebody should get anointed for their marriage. So he did that. He also taught other priests. I first met him in high school, and he gave us a talk of how you should have a relationship with your boyfriend, what should you be expecting, and how to handle that relationship.

He later influenced me because when I had my boyfriend, which I was engaged to, the first thing I felt was bringing it to him just to make sure I was on the right track. And he helped me sort out in that moment in time what I really wanted. I was engaged, but I think I was pressured to be engaged by society because that’s what everybody expected. I was in high school, I went through college, got my bachelor’s, went on to get my master’s. I got a boyfriend, he was working, everybody thought he loved me. And you have a 4-year relationship, you’re expected to get married, and that’s not what I really wanted. And [the priest] guided me, explaining to me what the role of a woman was, what the man expected. I come from a Latin culture, so what we call “Latisma” is that the woman stays home, the man
should always be professionally and intellectually better than the woman. You should have
children, dedicate your life to cooking. Your priority is always first your house, your
children, and then if you have time, your work. But work was never … I love my work, I feel
passion about my work. It’s part of me, it just drives me. It’s something that I have to have.
Even if it’s little, I have to have that. He wanted to take that away from me, and that made
me very unhappy.

[6:47]

V: He, you mean your fiancé.

G: My fiancé wanted to strictly take that away from me

V: And so you understood this from the talking with your priest …

G: Yes, yes.

V: … or was it earlier that you had already suspected this?

G: No, it was from talking with the priest, yes, because he was contradictory. He [my fiancé] told me he was supportive of me completing the master’s, but he did everything to contradict that. So his actions were contradicting of what he said. And when I talked to the priest he said, “Look don’t ever follow what a man says. Only follow what his actions are guiding you towards. If he’s saying ‘I love you,’ but on the other hand he’s not showing you in actions what he’s doing, he evidently wants something else.”

V: Right. OK.

G: So he kind of said, “If he doesn’t say something people usually are fun. If the job of a man is to make you happy, if somebody loves you, it’s because they want to see you happy. It’s not at their expense of happiness that they’re gonna … making you unhappy is how they’re going to be happy.”

V: So it sounds as if starting in high school and throughout your college years in Venezuela, you had this Jesuit priest as your spiritual guide and a life advisor of sorts?

G: Yes he was. He was explaining to me my problems. The woman’s are different than man’s problems, how women view different the world than men do, they are problem solvers, more oriented. Not that every woman is like that, and many issues that he explained, that I understood, I told him I wanted equality, that I don’t want to be submissive to a man. And he said he was gonna teach that to the other priests, cause I drew him my own model of what I thought a good marriage should be, and he said he was going to teach that, so he was gonna try to change.

V: So you were able to teach him while he was teaching you?

G: Yes. It was an exchange. So, he wanted to update the priests so they could teach people in the spiritual way that they should accept girls more in one way than the other.
V: And you indicated that he has now passed?


V: So five years ago.

G: Five years ago, yes.

V: And were you already in the United States?

G: No, I wasn’t.

V: Then you had been able to continue your relationship with him?

G: Yes, I went to trips, brought him presents. He likes owls because it’s knowledge, it’s wisdom, so he liked very much. I always brought him something from all my trips.

V: How nice.

G: Yes.

V: You mentioned a chemistry teacher in high school. Would you like to tell a little bit about that teacher’s influence?

G: Yes. What she did was show me how to teach. She came with a strong voice, she made a lot of sound when something was important. She was very indicative of what’s important, in class, and what is not. She seemed to be very, very tough, but she was very lenient. I was very scared of her, but then I was very scared in a nice manner. She showed me tricks like banging on the table. And after her actions, I tried to figure out what she was doing. She said, “Education has to be triggered by some kind of emotion. If you sit there and you would transmit any excitement, love, hate, fear for the student, you can’t activate somebody. You have to activate, engage the students through feelings rather than an object.” So she did it through capturing your attention by banging on the table when something was important, because she scared you, you know, “This must be done.” She also taught you that that was important. So she was a great influence, and she was always supportive of what I did, and she always told me to keep on going.

V: Did you have her for a single class or did you have her … ?

G: For a single class, yes.

[10:48]

V: OK. And so when you finished at high school, you continued to university immediately?

G: Yes, I did. I got accepted into a private school, and I got a scholarship.
V: This was in the same city you’ve lived in …

G: Yes, I was born in Caracas, Venezuela. Sorry. And when I was from 9 to 15 years old, I lived here in the States for three years and then four up in Canada. So, half of my education was between the United States and Canada, and the other one was in Venezuela. And then, immediately after high school, I went to college to study what they called systems engineering, which is kind of a mixture between industrial engineering and computer engineering. I went right through after I finished high school.

V: Were there any particularly significant teachers as mentors that you had during your university days?

G: Not the university days, no.

V: And then on to your master’s.

G: Yes, of course. In my master’s there was a girl, a woman really, who changed my life, she was my advisor. I first started my master’s dissertation with a man, and it didn’t work out for a year, so I had to switch, and then found my advisor during my master’s program, which happened to be the chair of the department. I had met her before because when I wanted to start my master’s program, I went up to her and told her I wanted to start a master’s. She looked at me, she was very harsh, and said, “Get out of here, you have nothing to do here,” right in my face. So, I walked away. I said, “Well you think that, thank you very much. I’ll do whatever I think,” and then went and applied and got accepted. She thought of that, there’s a reason I was coming from a private school. And the university where I was applying for my master’s, it was at the higher level. It was scientific, it was technical, and I came more from a business school, a university oriented toward industry. So she would have probably thought that my background wasn’t good enough for the master’s, or that I had to work. If I didn’t realize that I had to work a lot in order to obtain a master’s from that school.

So later on she became my advisor of my dissertation, she always was very harsh on me but she was right. I can say I sometimes went home crying. But she let me know myself, she was very tough, but she was right. If something is wrong or right, you have to accept it. So she made me look at the world from a logical point of view. She introduced me to algorithms, data structures. She made me look at things very, very differently, from a rational point of view. So she took out the rational part of me and made it more dominant in analyzing stuff. She also was a very good teacher.

And after I graduated I got an offer from Microsoft in Venezuela. And she did all her effort very much to keep me within the University. She told me if I wanted to, I could work with her. And nobody liked her very much, most of the people around her were scared of her. She was very tough, she could chew somebody up, and then throw them … man or woman. She was very intelligent, and she knew that. She was very … what’s the word? … arrogant because she knew she was more intelligent than you. Not many people liked her. But I didn’t care, she was a source of great knowledge and great wisdom, which I completely tried to take anything that I could from her in the sense of knowing. And I got to know her on a personal
basis when I started working with her, got to know her family, her daughters, her two
daughters, her son. And I worked with her after my master’s and she encouraged me to go
get my Ph.D. at the University of South Florida. She said … by the way, [I] still keep in
contact with her. She’s a great influence. Because … I don’t see her as a perfect teacher, but
she’s very knowledgeable, she knows how to teach, certainly. She has good ethical and moral
values, and I admire her. One of the best things is that I really admire her, and I see her also
as a woman. She went through a divorce, she divorced, and I was with her at that period of
time. She was a chair, she told me many confidential things during being a chair, and I kind
of understood. And she was very powerful because she was the chair, and she was involved
with many things in the University and people came around me just to try to get to her but
she had no problems with that, and she protected me.

[15:34]

V: And it sounds as if you may have protected her as well.

G: Yes, it was kind of … yes.

V: So you became acquainted with her first as you were working on your master’s, even
before you came into graduate school. And it was a relationship that evolved over how
many years?

G: Since 1993 to 2003. 10 years.

V: So your master’s took how many years?


V: And then you worked with her until you moved to Florida?

G: Until I moved to Florida, yes, that’s correct.

V: Are there any other stories from your time at university in Caracas that you would like
to share?

G: Yes, I met … well, she was called my mom, and then I worked with another guy, he called
himself also my dad. He was the first, he was the one who… He was the founding professor
of our department in University of Simón Bolívar. He graduated from Georgia Tech. He was
gonna be the first student that actually graduated from Georgia Tech. He studied with the
current dean of Georgia Tech right now, so they go back that far, many good years. My
University had exchanges with Georgia Tech, many people went to study there, and people
came to my university where I graduated from my master’s degree because they had a lot of
things in common. He’s now in the Academy of Sciences, he’s in anything that has to do
with technology, he’s a big person in IT technology. And he’s very famous, he worked for
the elections, he knows a lot of people in the government. Like if somebody here had
connections in Washington, he was called to the Congress to say anything that had to do with
information technology. He was the creator, he was the father, at least in my country.
So I got a chance to work with him, beside him, and I learned many things, as being sarcastic, about teaching, he protected me also, about logic. His dissertation was really on mathematical logic, which is the foundation of logic, and he got me into mathematical logic and all that theory and formality, which I quite don’t understand still, but I’m trying [laughter], I am definitely trying. And he showed me political, he had a very nice laugh, so he kind of knew how to defend himself but not in an aggressive matter, the aggression of words. So I saw him fight with people politically, but they were laughing, they were shaking hands, and they were telling each other how … ripping each other apart. Because they were saying crude things but in a nice manner, and I thought that was very neat. You don’t have to go to punches, or hit somebody. You can still be aggressive, but with words, and it’s kind of … it sets the tone to make the distance. He influenced me greatly intellectually because he was a very logical thinker.

So most of my logic, or the way I think, was really transformed by these two people. And I still keep in touch with him. They are older, in the 65’s. I usually call them my mom … my intellectual mom and dad.

V: Right. And so you continued to work with both of these people during the years before you went to Florida?

G: Yes. And after Florida, I keep in touch but in a personal basis.

V: And during those intervening years were you conducting research or … ?

G: Working. Working on projects, mainly. Application projects. One with the library, the National Library, because was very known … he’d recommend me. So I got to work with an oil company, with one of the biggest oil companies, because he, again, recommended me.

And with my advisor, helping her in a big project, was trying to automize public administration in Venezuela. So I was trying to help her out in controlling software development, to develop a public administration software for the government because they wanted to take up corruption. They were in the elections when … it was very hectic. One of them even got shot at, so it was …

V: Heavily dramatic!

G: Yeah it was … yeah. It was dramatic because we never knew if it was because he … the elections … well, he didn’t get shot but his car got shot at … or it was just delinquency that normally is in Venezuela. They are very big on … they were handling projects that were huge amounts of money.

V: So you mentioned this idea of delinquency. Were there influences, safety issues, that influenced the way you grew up, the protectiveness that may have come upon you and your sisters … ?

G: Oh yes, because Venezuela is a very dangerous country, there is a lot of delinquency. You can get robbed, you can get kidnapped. So you have to watch out where you’re going, when
you return home, you have to look behind a mirror just to see if somebody’s not following
you, to take your car away, things like that.

V: So do you think this has influenced some of who you are now and the way you conduct
your science?

G: Oh no, I don’t think that influences me in sciences. Although it makes me more aware, be
more analytical. Like if you are feeling safe, you don’t look around. I always look around to
see who’s behind my back. So when I do analysis, I try to do a more complete analysis of
what’s going on, what’s around. It makes me be more analytical than usual. But from my job,
I don’t think it … it helped me because it made me be more analytical but from the safeness
point, I know here I’m safe, there’s no problem. But that’s a good point.

[21:32]

V: Yeah. I was just curious because thinking about your advisor being shot at, for
whatever reason, seems like a fairly dramatic happening.

G: Oh, but that didn’t scare me, no. I went to protest in Venezuela. And I’d been in Cuba, also. I
thought that if I don’t stand up for what I believed, then I’m also dead, so if I die, physically,
or if I die, the other way, it doesn’t matter. So I went to protest, and then I realized, what the
heck am I doing here, somebody could shoot at me right now and then I’m gone! [laughter]
But I had to do it, there’s some things you have to do because you believe in liberty or
whatever. And going to Cuba was just an experience. I had an opportunity to do a
programming workshop over in Cuba. And the Pope was going to go to Cuba, so I thought it
was neat to go see the Pope in Cuba for the first time in history and also be able to go to a
programming workshop when there were top people from Europe going over there and gonna
be teaching object-oriented, Prolog, logic programming. So it was quite an experience. When
I arrived there, again, I realized you could disappear from the world and your parents could
not even know where you are and you would never exist. But then that makes you value
more what freedom is. And you don’t realize what you have unless somehow you lose it. So
when I got to Cuba I realized how fortunate I was in respect to other countries, to be free, to
be able to speak out, to be able to do many things.

[23:10]

V: Interesting. Is it a good moment to transition to what led you to move to Florida?

G: Oh yes. The government. Politically. I was working at my University and I wasn’t even
getting paid. We had like three months and we didn’t get paid. I was working for free, I was
living with my parents. I saw no future at all because I wasn’t earning enough money to
move away, I was big enough to move on my own, I wanted to be independent, and there
was no opportunity for me to grow in the University. My advisor was going to … everybody
kind of fled when they saw that there were no opportunities. My advisor went to Spain, a lot
of faculty were migrating. So, as other people did, I kind of looked for my opportunity, saw
Florida open doors for me and I said, “This is my opportunity,” and that’s why I chose South
Florida. I also had an offer from Texas A&M, but it was too far away from home. South
Florida won because of the locality.
V: Did you move by yourself?

G: Yes, yes, I did. I did it all by myself. I got to grad school, everything. My dad and mom didn’t probably know about it because as soon as I didn’t get married, they were against my education. They are very formal, old-fashioned, and they thought the best thing for me to do was to get married. And they weren’t looking for their daughter to be working. They wanted more for their daughter to have a family. So, through my Ph.D., I knew they were not going to be too happy about … Although they would contradict, they would say, “Yes, yes, we’ll support you.” But then they would do other things to go against it. Although they knew, I didn’t let them know all the information, so I could make the decisions. I let them know something, but kept enough information so I had the power to make the decision. So my dad didn’t realize that I was leaving until maybe two weeks when I actually bought the plane ticket. So he knew, but he didn’t digest it because I had told him, but very softly, without any drama. That affected them quite a bit. They were very emotionally affected when I left home.

[25:28]

V: You were the first of the children to move so far away?

G: No, my sister had married, but she was married and moved to Miami about eight months before I left. But my sister left married, so that was a good thing. But my dad sounded like, “You’re not getting married and you’re moving on your own. In our culture you’re supposed to get married.” If you’re moving, if you leave your house, it’s because you’re married, somebody’s gonna take care of you. I don’t need nobody to take care of me, I’m a grown woman.

V: So you were somewhat of a pioneer, or a rebel, in that?

G: Yes, very much, very much, I fought for every right, everything in my house. I was the first to date, first to have a boyfriend. My big sister was kind of laid back. I had to actually fight for most of the things because I was the first one to go do it. I fought for my master’s degree. They were very much against it. And I said, “Well you’re against it, I’m sorry to hear that.” They realized later on that it was a good thing to do, but at the moment of time … It’s like when you have children, some children set new paths, and sometimes that’s scary for parents because you can’t protect them. You know, where they are going, they’re going to this big tunnel, and you don’t know if they’re gonna come out of it. So you’re really scared for them. So I understood their point of view, although I didn’t share it. So I went my way, so I told them, “Look I’m going that way. Bye-bye.” So, I did the same thing with my PhD. “I know you don’t want me to move alone. I’m going over there, bye-bye. I’m not asking you for money, I’m not asking you for anything, I’ve got my funding, bye-bye. I’m going over there.”

V: Did it make it easier for you once you got over there that your sister was close by in Miami?

G: No, because my relationship with my big sister has always been very competitive. So she’s always seen me as her competitor, and I’ve always won. Cause every time … in school I was better than her in that I was always very competitive. When she went to University, I ended...
up graduating before her. So I was very competitive with her. I was sometimes very mean because I said, “Look I won!” And I was kind of the kid that laughed at her, “Ha ha ha!” and I was waving, “Here! Bye-bye! You’re way behind, I’m up here!” But no, not at all. She moved to Miami, I moved to Tampa. That was just coincidence because Tampa was the nearest university where I got accepted from home.

V: I wanted, while we were talking about family issues, to talk about the sister that had joined you …

G: Mm hmm, Carolina.

V: … for the SIGCSE conference and find out what her connection was at the university.

G: She’s my younger sister. I have two younger sisters, she’s the oldest of my younger sisters. I always was very close to her. In some ways … she’s very, very smart …

V: So, to return to the question … your next-younger sister …

G: Carolina, yes. I was very close to her. She’s very smart, she’s very logical. She’s very, very, very fast, she’s a fast, fast thinker. She’s very intuitive, she catches things on the fly. Things that are perceptually maybe … not many people see them, she catches them, so we have a special communication because she’s really fast. During my master’s she thought I was crazy, so she didn’t talk to me too much.

After I left home, she wanted … all the things that were going to my country, my dad also knew that none of my younger sisters had any chance of being professionals, it was not a good environment for them to be developing. So I was the one that helped her come to the States and get a master’s. I also knew that she was very good with languages, and she knows how to teach. So I got her to go to French school back in Venezuela with me and kind of led her to know that she was very good at that. And she didn’t even know that I was trying to lead her toward that. So I’ve always been protecting her and trying to lead her without she even knowing … she likes to be led, but without knowing that she’s being led by.

She was a very good teacher, she taught French. She speaks French, English, and Spanish. She has a very nice ear for languages, and I knew that. I helped her out to go to a master’s program at USF, the same university where I was, and get funding, also. She’s graduating this December [2007], Spanish literature. She’s a good teacher, she teaches Spanish at USF very, very well. I learned a lot from her just talking about how we taught, and students, and what we should do.

She also has a boyfriend who was one of my colleagues, was one of my friends in the Ph.D. studies, so she’s very close to me because of that. She didn’t realize that I cared so much about her until she saw all the effort and all the things I went through to get her there. She’s a very good teacher, and I wanted to see if we could extend our sister good relationship with a professional relationship because I really think she has very good ideas. So I brought her to SIGCSE because I know there was technology, she’s not that bad in technology, to try to
update her on the latest technology, to see if she would get enthusiastic about trying to mix Spanish and technology. She’s very reasonable, she’s very logical. So I wanted to get her more in the area so we could publish together something within the educational: reviews, journals, etc. And I’m still trying, she was hesitant to go there. And I said, “Well come here, get a plane, go to Covington.” She actually, when she met you, she was very excited, and we’re trying to find a way we can work together and publish, because she cares. We talk through Messenger: “What happened to me with this student, what should I do?” I ask her. “This is happening to me.” “Should I do this?” “What test questions, how do you decide test questions?” “I’m not doing this right. Who should I talk to that’s doing this?” “Happened something to the student, or it’s not emotionally …” So we keep a lot of communication, especially because of the teaching part. So we talk a lot about that.

V: Sounds like a lot of mutual mentoring going on.

G: Oh yes, it’s both ways. Yes it is. And when I got my PhD, the first thing that came to her mind was, “I have to get a Ph.D.!” [laughter]

V: So she’s finished her master’s and has now embarked on her PhD?

G: No, no, I told her, “Look, a Ph.D., you have to think about. If you really want it, go for it, but not just because I have it, you have to have it.” So she still has her comps [comprehensive examinations]. Although she’s in the master’s program, they make her do comps. So she’s presenting her comps in a bit.

[32:27]

V: Very exciting.

G: Oh yeah.

V: It’s fabulous that you have each other. It’s such a productive relationship.

G: Yes it’s emotionally and… It’s always kind of like me protecting her so she’ll be safe, somehow. And her boyfriend is much like me. She understands her boyfriend because she tells her boyfriend, “I can understand you because I know Graciela. If I didn’t have a sister, I would probably not be able to understand you.” And he helped also her understand some issues about Ph.D., about computing, that she may not have realized. So it works out.

V: So, continuing to your Ph.D., and the studies, the experience. Are there any mentors who are particularly meaningful, any stories you would like to tell about that path?

G: Yes there’s a mentor. There’s a couple of mentors, not really a fixed length in time. But I have a math teacher, a mathematical logic teacher, who’s very supportive. He always told me to go do whatever you want. Big problems, go for it, very supportive. He was on the committee of my dissertation. I also found a teacher who was a psychologist, but he had a master’s degree in computer science, he graduated from Stanford in psychology. His name is Dr. Rundus. We used to have chats, morning talks, about teaching. He’s very excited about teaching, so we used to get together and just say, “What’s the best way to teach? I’m worried
that I’m teaching this way. Am I getting the students to respond as I want to? Should I do a
survey? Should it be more … don’t use PowerPoints? Should I use more of the board?
Should I do some more handouts? What should I do in order to improve my teaching? Did
you know the latest software? Did you know Alice came out? Did you know this other
software came out? How can that be used to improve teaching? Novice, experts, approach?
Who’s a novice, how to teach novices to become experts, what’s the requirement?” So we
always talked about teaching, and he was very reasonable, very logical. He was spoken out,
very light-toned. I was always attentive to what he had to say.

I got into MentorNet. That was also a very, very big help. Because in the beginning, I was
with Dr. Rundus as my advisor for one semester. Then my advisor who I graduated with took
me from him in the sense that he told me, “Come to my class.” And I switched from Dr.
Rundus to Dr. Christensen, who was my advisor during my Ph.D. So for a year, it was OK
when he was trying to get me to work with him. So I said, “I’m not a networks person. I
never thought of networking as my specialty in Ph.D. I have no previous background. I come
from programming languages, I come from algorithms. You’re a very practical person. I
don’t know if this will be …” And he said, “No, no, no,” and he let me choose my area of
research, choose whatever area of research has to do with networking. “We’ll work
something out.” He was very open. I said, “Well he’s letting me work on whatever I choose
to work. That’s something better than just working on something somebody tells you to
work.” So I made him a proposal on peer-to-peer networks. He liked the proposal, he took
me in.

I got into MentorNet. So I registered and got in contact with an e-mail mentor, so he e-mailed
a lot. He was a physics professor at Duke University during that time, and he helped me out.
He was very reasonable, scientific. “Do this because of this. Do this under these assumptions,
do this …” He was very logical. Although physics has nothing to do with computers, he told
me things that were common sense. He had very spectacular writing. He knew how to write
very well, very clear. So I learned also how to write clearly because of the e-mails we
exchanged together.

My family came to live with me because my sister, Carolina, came to live with me. My mom
also came to live with … My other little sister came to work here because they were
migrating to Venezuela. So I had a lot of family responsibilities which I didn’t have before.
My dad came for a visit and got sick. He had to go to the hospital, he fainted even. And I was
doing summer … I was teaching classes. Although I think he [my advisor] really liked the
way I worked or whatever, he was very tough on me.

But he really helped me out to finish my dissertation. He wanted me to finish, and he helped
me with my dissertation, which was kind of contradictory. And at the end I said, “Well what
the heck? I got what I wanted. I wanted to graduate, I found a job, there’s nothing that has to
do with you.” But since I had that relationship, everybody knew that we had our big
differences. Which I think is better than what other people do because at least we told each
other that we had the differences, and it was a more sincere relationship than pretending that
you have a nice advisor.
So I went to counseling services because I had so many problems. I never fight with people. I never wanna see myself be a rebel and doing the minimal, doing all this stuff. I shouldn’t be doing that. If he has issues, he has issues. I even bought a book, *How to Deal with Annoying People*. Because I wanted to solve the problem. I never had personal problems with anybody or professional problems. And if I had personal problems, it didn’t get involved with my professional work. So I bought a book, I went to counseling services, I told them, “I just want to finish this chapter, break to my new life, this is something else.” I went to counseling services, he [the counselor] said things like, “That happens. Don’t worry about it, keep on going.” He did some tests. He told me my personality is this, this, watch according to this test, have a happy life, see you later!

V: So you were very proactive in trying to ensure that it was going to be OK?

G: Yes, because you can’t be an atoned … I’m always very logical with people. “You don’t like that? OK, you don’t like that.”

We initiated a networks group, so I got another person to be the president. We started meeting, so there were students, Ph.D. students, meeting together in our department, like eight of us. That captured the attention, that had never happened in our department. We got pizza, we started bringing in speakers, so that was not the usual thing. And that was a very good thing, because intellectually, we got involved many other people, and we started a good group that I still maintain contact with.

But he [my advisor] got kind of like, “What are you doing? That’s not important, you have to focus on your research, publish papers.” I was always doing something or being involved with somebody, trying to get projects done. I can’t sit and just work on one thing. I can do that, but I need to have other projects. I can work on something three days, and then I work one day on something else. Then that will help me, when I go back to my other work, to see my work in a different way. So he didn’t let me do that, he wanted me just to work, work, work.

V: So how difficult was it as you finalized your dissertation and were able to get it signed off, defended and signed off?

G: Once I got a job, he turned … he was very helpful. “You have to finish your dissertation, this is what you have to do,” and we kept on going. He wanted me to practice for a week for my presentation, he was very happy with my presentation. As long as you’re happy, and you can sign, that’s fine with me!

V: So were you working for Verizon during this last period of time?

G: Oh no, no.

V: I see.
G: But I wasn’t the type to work in industry. Verizon, I didn’t get the job. They didn’t ask me for a job offer, but I knew that was because of what I said during the interview. They didn’t want an independent person, they wanted a more structured person working with others. And I knew that Verizon was not gonna call me. I sometimes know what to … Like for the poster presentation last night [at the Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing], I knew I wasn’t gonna get called. Because I kinda knew what they were expecting, and I know when you fill out the role for … I somehow know. I know sometimes when a paper is gonna get accepted or not because you can easily read what the paper wants. I can know when something is gonna get accepted or not just because I read it.

V: So it sounds as if the opportunity with Verizon to interview was very important as a turning point, even though it didn’t result in anything.

G: Yes, it was out of Heaven.

V: So, tell us about the process of finding the position that you’re in now. You’ve graduated … Or are there other stories you’d like to tell about your Ph.D.?

G: Not that I remember.

V: OK, so you’ve defended, finished all of the things surrounding your Ph.D., and you are looking for an academic position.

G: Before I finished the Ph.D., I looked for an academic position. In December of 2006, I applied for a scholarship from the CRA-W because it was supposed to help you find jobs in a teaching school, because I love teaching, and that’s one thing I really wanted to do. And they let you go to a SIGCSE conference, they pay for you to go a SIGCSE conference. My advisor and I have published a paper in the last 2004 SIGCSE conference. He went when it was published. He didn’t say anything, he told me it was a very nice conference. But he didn’t even take me or told me to apply for a scholarship. He didn’t do any effort for me to go with him. And I said, “Well, what I’ve heard of this conference was really nice.” I would like to get in touch with more of education because that’s what I want to do. I want to be more in the teaching school. At the workshop, they told me some tools that you have to do, I followed that.

I met a presenter at the workshop, and she was eating with me at a table. She worked in this school, she started talking about this school [Youngstown State University], she made a very good impression on me, she still does. She’s my current neighbor in the next-door office. She said, “Well why don’t you apply for the job?” And I said, “Well, I’m not a security person, you’re looking for a security person, I’m a networks person.” And she goes, “Well, we may not hire a person in security because there may not be, why don’t you apply?” She was very reasonable, she just said it twice. I immediately sent her my CV. I immediately applied for … a couple of weeks later, I got a call. Three weeks later, I was getting an interview, I hadn’t finished even my dissertation. Four weeks later, five weeks later, “Do you accept?” I accept. This was around the middle of March. March, probably April, first week of April, March, last week of March. I said yes.
I went to my advisor, said, “Look, I got a job, we have to finish up.” And he said, “Well, let’s go for it.” I went for it. Didn’t sleep, didn’t eat. Saturdays, Sundays, all days were just continuous. I was just reading and working and working. I defended the 21st of May, and it got signed off. Get ready. And I was doing my Grace Hopper poster against my advisor’s … because I needed to do something on my own. I said my goal was to graduate with some independent work, even if it was very little. So I said this poster seems to be … I know this is a good idea, I can put it down. It had to be some kind of research. But I have to tell myself that I can do some independent work. So I sat down, didn’t sleep for two days. I sent it off to Grace Hopper, it got accepted. I applied for a scholarship, I got a scholarship.

So before I started my job, which was actually in computer network security, I already had something that I could start my research agenda with. So I was very happy to … I finished the Ph.D., I got my research in what I wanted to do, my independent work, going. I got my work going.

And my chair [at Youngstown State University], we talked in the interview. I told him what I wanted to do, and that’s what I wanted to, and he has set me up exactly where I told him to set me up to do. So people say, “Well, you’re lucky.” No, I told him that I wanted A, B, C, and D, and I really did want A, B, C, and D. It wasn’t because it was the interview, it’s because those were my goals. He set me up with A, B, and C, and D. Well that’s what I’m doing. There’s no magic to that. So he’s been very supportive, and here I am, and hopefully everything will go well, but I know I have to work a ton, maybe 10 tons. But I’m definitely looking forward to that.

V: Very exciting. So you’ve been in this position all of 2 months?

G: Yes, since February … since August 20th.

V: And so what I’d like to do before we talk about the experience specifically right now is return to a theme that’s come up again and again, and that’s your passion for teaching. So let’s talk a little bit about why it is that you’re so passionate about teaching, some of your teaching philosophy.

[55:55]

G: OK. I love teaching because I can help people and also getting money out of it, maintain myself. It’s a work that you can do, that you get benefits, economic benefits, like money, so you can sustain yourself, you don’t have to depend on others economically. But also you get another kind of reward, which … seeing a laugh, a face, working, helping somebody be something, and that really, really, really helps. Maybe somebody may come in a class, and they don’t think of themselves very high, they don’t think they can do it, and then helping them, discovering, being a part of their discovery process of the world of knowledge of something else, because I always view education as a discovery process.

I started teaching my last year of my bachelor’s degree as a TA. I said, “Cool! I can help people, and I can get money!” And then I got a job after I graduated for 3 months, and my boss sent me to teach the software I was maintaining. Cool! He gave me a bonus! So I get
more money, and then I can also help people. And that was very cool. And they all came to
me and asked me questions, and that was very rewarding, seeing their faces light up, and
“Now I can do this because you told me how to do this!” And then I went to teach during my
master’s degree. Cool! They’re gonna pay my master’s, plus I’m gonna get some money, and
I’m gonna be teaching! Hey, this is very, very nice, I get to work and what I want, and also I
get to study. Not too many people get that opportunity. I got engaged with the students, and
they were just wonderful. They came to me after class. I didn’t have to tell them when they
have to work, but generally those students in Venezuela at university, they are like that. My
philosophy of teaching was trying to make them discover, try to tie things … finding creative
ways for them to discover the same concepts. I believe that you can use the knowledge that is
all around us to associate it with what you have to teach. And I love that, just trying to look at
things from different points of view. I learned from my own nephew, who, he’s … He can’t
sit still. So in order for him to learn, I have to put things in his hand. I have to wave at him. I
have to be in motion, which is not my traditional way of learning. And it was very incredible
for me to try to show him something, and I had to adapt, from his point of view, so I can
actually teach him something.

V: How old is your nephew?

G: He’s 3 years old. But he’s very, very, very bright. I had to move things around because he
wanted … I had to actually move my hands to get his attention, so he could learn. So my
philosophy’s trying to tie whatever I need to teach, not only to real world concepts, but to
common real world concepts. So what I try to do sometimes is make my students go through
an experience, all of them together—a video, a movie—so I know that all of them share the
same thing, and then using that to teach whatever I need to teach.

So that’s my philosophy. I just feel very rewarded when I see, especially girls. In Venezuela I
advised a girl. She wasn’t a very good student, but she was hard worker. She was very
intelligent, although she wasn’t a good student. And she got the job. I was advising her.
Saturdays and Sundays, I sat with her during software design, analysis, charts, and she
actually followed and got the job. And that feels very rewarding when you know that a
person is putting the time, you’re putting the time, and the person is getting to where she
wants to get.

Teaching allows me to be creative. It allows me to be myself. There’s no pre-judgement,
there’s no structure. Anything could happen. It could go good, or it could go … there’s no
preconditions, there’s no limitations. That’s what I really like about it.

[60:09]
V: So you didn’t quite finish saying, you said it could go good, it could go …?

G: Bad. [laughter]

V: So the question is, what do you do then, how do you …?

G: You keep on trying. You keep on trying. If that doesn’t work, don’t do it again! You try
something else.
V: All right. Now you are an associate professor.

G: No, an assistant professor. Pre-tenured. I’m not yet tenured.

V: Pre-tenured, assistant professor position. And so you are beginning to evolve your teaching philosophy. Can you talk a little bit about how you’ve evolved already in the short time you’ve been in this position?

G: That’s a very good question. I think I’m evolving towards … I’m centering more on how to make those students that are not the brightest students, how can I change and teach those students who are average or underneath the average? How can I make them go up a level? I’m not centering more; my university is an open-access university, so there’s very good students, very good students who will always be very good students. But I need to take care of the other half of the class. So what can I do, how can I make a class in such a way that the good students will not be bored? I can give them projects, I can get in touch with them, telling them … try to make them do more. But then teach to those who are not as bright as they are. And I think, my university … I’m switching more from concepts to hands-on experience. And not hands-on experience with computers, hands-on experience with toys. So what I try to do is go to toy stores, because we all have the children inside of us, and try to bring toys that they have previously handled, so they have that previous experience, and thinking of how those toys, you think about them, and tying — because they were small, they were children when they played with those toys, or even a teenager — and putting that so I can teach them the concepts and then use that to bring them up a level, to try to bring them up to expertise. I haven’t yet evaluated if that’s possible, but that’s what I’m right now doing. I bring cards to class. I bring toddler toys to class. They are very colorful. I can throw them in class, and they’ll follow the toy. And I try to bring as much as possible … My examples are always about them. You get up in class, you go to class, what do you do? I try for them to tell me what they do. I have students who work, so all my projects are basically, “What do you think this project can bring to your work, to your boss? How can you not only impress your boss, but how can you use this in your work?” I think that’s where I’m trying to lead.

I love community-service learning because I believe that students need to be more … Computer science, you’re always fixed to a computer. You don’t get to have too much of a social interaction as other humanities careers do. So I’m trying to bring together the community and that social aspect because I believe the student has to have the technical, what he needs, has to have the professional, but he’s still some member of a community and a member of the world. So he has to have some social skills, some social ability, has to be socially aware, especially in the global environment in which we live, of what’s going on with the community. So I wanted them to have the community service learning instead of having a project that’s gonna be graded and doesn’t have anybody who cares about the project, maybe I can lead a student to help a non-profit organization. They don’t have the money, but the students can get involved, and they can see that reward that usually is not seen in industry, in internships, but they can help somebody and they can see that what they’re doing affects somebody else. So I’m trying to push that in the university, in the world, in an overview in the university that I work at. I’ve received a little bit of help from
other people I’ve met at Kent State University. And a master’s student in leadership, she’s willing to help me out, to start the program and see where it goes from there.

V: So you’re putting some mechanisms in place to make it easier to conduct this community-based learning?

G: Yeah, I want something to be quick, and I want to evaluate it, so I want to be accurate and reliable. I want to evaluate something so that the evaluation can be me and what I expected because that’s how you teach. If you’re teaching something, you need to know if … how far away the students are from what you expect the students to be, so you need some kind of accuracy of what you’re teaching. This is where I want this student to be, this is where he is. And you want a quantifiable way of defining them. And then you also need, that if this is a test, I’m a human, I need for this test to reliably measure what he knows. So if I tested 10 people, like him again, I would get the same answer. All kind of the same answer, but there has to be some … You have to reproduce the same test, you should be able to get the same answer. So that’s part of what the assessment is supposed to be doing. And I want the assessment to be multiple-choice, very easy, so I can get people, other faculty involved. I’ll make the work easy for them. You just have to give them this, a package, and that’s it. I believe in more of the American culture, keep it simple, keep it short. If I have to implement community service, it doesn’t have to be a big program, this huge program. It could be something real quick, real simple. I’ll tell you how to package it effectively. Use it, and it’s even better than doing project-based … Make it easier for the faculty member to implement it.

V: Very interesting. One of the things I can imagine is also challenging as you begin your career is the balance between teaching, service, and research. What have you experienced so far in that balance?

G: Right now, I’m more in teaching and research than service. But I have to switch. I talk to the dean on Tuesday, this coming Tuesday. He came to the department and talked to us, he said that we should be doing research, teaching, and service. That’s what’s expected of us. So I’ll be switching my … probably in teaching, I’ll dedicate more time to research than I will do to teaching. Because you can always try to be very effective. So what I will do is have maybe less homework, which I have homeworks every two weeks, have less project-based … So I will try to take some time from teaching and put it more into research without … There’s some basic things that you have to teach, and I’ll try to teach always that. But teaching will come after I tenure because I can dedicate more time to teaching now that I’m tenured, I will have more time. But I will set up in a way that I still have what I need from teaching. I think the students can put up the time instead of me trying to guide them. But definitely I have to switch to research, teaching, and service as my priorities if I want to be in the academia in the current university where I am.

V: Of the courses that you’ve taught so far, which ones have been your favorites and why?

G: So far, from … currently I am teaching?
V: You’ve taught several things over the years. In Florida, you’ve done some teaching, and now you’re teaching your first classes at Youngstown.

G: Computer networks, the current course I am teaching. Basically, because I’m leading all the way. I get to choose what I teach, how I teach it, and I love computer networks, it’s just something that fascinates me, how things move from one place to another. And how to make them move, and how to make them reliable, and how bits travel through the wire, that really fascinates me. And that you can actually do some cool applications like peer-to-peer networks, file sharing, web, e-mail, things that can transform the lives of others. I take away e-mail from everybody, what would everybody be? It really transformed the way we look at things.

V: Do you have any particular stories to relate about any of your students?

G: Currently, right now, yes. I have a student who’s … I have many stories of students. I love students. I went to Youngstown and they told me, “Well, they’re not Stanford students.” They’re students. To me the students are the most treasurable thing I could … They’re the future, they’re the continuation, they’re the future! So you shouldn’t say bad things about the students. They’re working, they’re putting stuff there.

I have a student who took a test, he wants me to be his advisor, he’s a master’s student, and he did very bad on the test. And then he wrote me an e-mail, this very long e-mail telling, “I feel very bad that I blew off your test,” and all that. I said, “Look, even if you had got a zero, I would still be your advisor.” I know he’s a very good student, he’s also a teacher, he’s a teaching assistant. So I don’t want to lose him. I see the potential that he has. I go, “Do not worry. I’m not the one to judge you because I’m not here to be a judge. I’m here to help you get to where you want to be. If you blew off a test, who hasn’t?” It doesn’t really … a test to me, my definition of a test, is really for you to learn, is not to measure what you learn. A test should be a learning experience, not a torture experience. And I tell all my students, “Make mistakes.” Because a mistake is not something wrong you did, judgment, because people always put judgment there, a mistake is a lack of knowledge. So if you made a mistake, you better head down to your books and go read more, so you won’t make the same mistake. It’s just a lack of knowledge. Because I believe that all students … I don’t believe too much in IQ, but I know people have studied more so their knowledge base has grown, so they seem to be more intelligent than somebody else. But if somebody else puts the effort and tries to grow their knowledge base, they’re gonna be as intelligent as the other person. But some people over the years have worked more on their knowledge base than others, so it’s very hard to catch up. [laughter] But some other people, they can catch up. They don’t have the knowledge base small enough that, I can give you the books, I can give you the papers. I’ve been there. And I started knowing nothing. So I can help you build a little bit of that knowledge base. There’s a student who comes to class, and he’s very good, he’s always active, and he wants to be a teacher. His wife came up to me in a meeting. She came up, “Graciela,” she said. “Do you know who I am?” And I said, “I have no clue!” [She said,] “Well I work in nursing school and am the wife of one of your students.” So it was very rewarding. This was my first semester, and I get the wife telling me that I influenced the
student so much that he’s telling his wife about what he learns in class. So your influence is not right there in the class, it’s also affecting their personal life. Other people are knowing me because of me teaching classes. So I think it’s really cool that you can really influence somebody’s life, hopefully, and I think in a very positive way.

I have a student right now, he doesn’t seem to be the brightest student. He’s working on his project. I didn’t tell him to work on his project. Sent him a couple of papers to read, he already read them, he told me what he liked about them, what he didn’t like about them. He sent me more links. He told me other papers that had to do with it. That’s a 100% to me. He got a 100% on that test to me because he’s doing the work, he’s the one learning, and that’s incredibly rewarding. And he’s not the best student. So if I can get those students who are OK, to motivate them to learn, that’s one of the biggest things I think, that’s one of my biggest goals that I have.

I have other students in security class who are grad students. And I have this girl; she’s a non-traditional student, she’s African-American. She speaks very softly, but she’s participating in class. She gets the right answers. So it’s very rewarding to see women, to see … And I have other women in networking. They’re so bright, they’re so bubbly. They speak out. And one of my goals is to bring them next year to Grace Hopper, make them do a poster, make them do anything. They’re so bubbly. I can feel their curiosity for doing things. They sit down at the computer, they are hands-on. They are very bright. I just have to tell them to put the time into whatever they want to do.

And I have tons of other examples. [laughter] I better keep it short.

V: I think that your enthusiasm is probably infectious as well.

G: I hope so.

V: And just for the recording, Graciela is animated and excited and her eyes are sparkling as she’s talking about all of this. It makes my heart warm just to hear the strength that you bring to your teaching.

G: I love it. It’s passion, it’s really passion, it’s not love, so I have to be careful!

V: That’s right, that’s right. Good point. Professional organizations. Are there any professional organizations you’ve been a member of, and how have they contributed to you career up to this point?

G: The networks group was a big plus because I had, back at USF, University of South Florida, I had a whole bunch of fellows in the networks area, they were all guys. And they really helped because I could go up to them and talk about, curse out about my advisor, and they go, “No problem at all, we are all behind you,” learn about what they were doing. So it was more of a support group, and they’re friends, and they were also good professionals, they were also interested in teaching. So it was seeing that somebody cares about what you were doing. You’re not just one person sitting in front of the computer talking to your advisor.
V: Sounds like, in general, you've been surrounded by people who are supportive of your ambitions and caring about teaching, and that that's been very encouraging to you.

G: Yes. I currently … in Youngstown, I was invited by the ACM to give a talk about my research. And I went there and tried to motivate them, and they liked my talk. And they were very … they even mentioned that to the chair, and the chair came up to me and said, “I heard you gave a good talk to the students.” And they say “hi” to me all the time, and people say, “Do you know those students?” And I say, “I just met them. They’re not my students, but they came to my talk.” So I think I can build some good relationships with students.

V: And it sounds as if already at this stage in your career you’ve done a lot of advising, you’ve been able to help students that are behind you figure out what they want to do.

G: At Youngstown, maybe not too much. At USF, yes, I tried to help, maybe not as much because I wasn’t her advisor, but to a woman … I started a woman’s group at USF before I came here. And we all got together, we did go to two lunches together, and we were talking about women’s issues, how women should support each other. They came because I was telling them about interviews, the questions you get at interviews. I was the first to graduate from that group and get a job, so I was trying to help them out, and had very good friends. So we were getting together, talking about woman things, and that was very, very nice. But I had to leave, but I’d still like some e-mails to see if I could get something going there.

V: So both of these examples are fairly local organizations. Have you been involved with organizations at more of a national level yet?

G: No, no, not at all. I’m trying to start a Latin organization at YSU to see if I can recruit more Latin people because they usually fall out of high school, and see how I can get that. And at YSU, of course, I belong to a more global … it’s called a junior faculty group. So I hang out with a lot of junior faculty when they have their events. So those people from economics, young faculty who are also in the same position that I am. And we play sometimes cards, cricket, whether we do a lunch. So I get to meet a lot of the other people who are going through the same thing.

V: So it sounds as if it’s a social network, a support network, to help you as you’re getting settled.

G: Yes, yes, it is. And you hear, “What did the dean say to you?” “What are you thinking over there in that other college?” And also you can build up research with economics, there’s people from geology. I’ve been very involved also with several projects, the person who told me to come to Youngstown to work, that I’ve gotten myself into. “We are IT.” We’re organizing for November 16th a “We are IT Day”, which is an initiative led by Ohio, by the Ohio government, state government. They gave a grant to my friend to make a one-day event for the girls in high school. So I’m helping her organize. I got a keynote speaker, who’s a girl I met in Ph.D. at Carnegie-Mellon. She’s African-American. She’ll be a good model for the women to follow. I’m involved in the activities of that day. It’s a service activity. It doesn’t
count too much for tenure, but it’s definitely something I love being a part of. Writing letters, getting grant money, seeing where you can get some pennies out of here, pennies out of there to set up the activity.

And I also belong to the OLN, which is the Ohio Learning Network. My friend also had a grant from there and she invited me to be a part of it. So what we’re trying to do is clickers, is class response systems, so we’re trying to lead the way for YSU to get class response systems. That’s also a little grant that’s going on. I got to meet people from Kent State and from different parts of Ohio. So I’ve only worked for eight weeks, but …

V: You’ve accomplished in a lot.

G: I’m involved in many things. Hopefully I can have the strength to keep them all up.

V: Challenges. Are there challenges that you faced along the way that we haven’t talked about yet that you’d like to share?

G: I think the biggest challenge in general that I always face is that I need to be flexible and I need to change into that. And I know everybody wants to stay the same way because there’s no effort to it. So what I try to do is always try to put a challenge or something that I have to change, I have to adapt. Because when you’re teaching, it’s not about how you learn, it’s about how they learn, and it’s a process in which you have to learn all the time. You have to learn what they need, you have to learn what they want. Do you want to be a good teacher? You have to accommodate the expectations. They’re gonna get a job. Where? I have to learn. I have to learn what job they’re going to get. Where are they gonna get, what are they gonna do, what technologies are going to be … There’s always learning, learning to me, it’s always been a challenge. I love it because it really keeps me growing and growing, growing and growing. But the biggest challenge is to be able to adapt and change to whatever the needs of my institution and my students should be.

V: Are there any compromises you’ve had to make in your career?

G: Oh yes. I had to decide between career and getting married. That was very tough at that moment. But I was very happy about that decision.

Of course, my Ph.D. My family came to live with me. I didn’t have time for my personal life. Because I had my dissertation, I had my PhD, I had to take care of my family, they were living with me. I had to decide, either you help your family, or you get your personal life straightened out. So I decided to help my family and said this is not the moment in which I can have a personal life. I’ll put that away for a while, but I know I’ll get it back.

So, now I got it back. But it was a compromise, in a moment of time you have to decide, you can’t have everything. But your decision, you have to go all the way with it. You have to know if you made a decision, you have to keep it. Don’t worry, you’ll get to your goal, and then you can change your … But you have to be honest with yourself, with what you want, and you have to know that you can’t have everything. Now, of what you can have, what do
you want? And if you be honest with yourself, and know, I want this, and this, then it
shouldn’t be any problem. But you have to choose.

V: You have to choose. Do you have any strong outside interests that will help us
understand you better?

G: Oh yes, I have one very big strong outside interest. I like running. I like speed. I started
walking first, when I was doing my dissertation, for the stress. And I started literally walking.
And I walked faster. Then I walked faster. And I started walking faster. Then I started
running. Then I ran one mile. Then I ran three miles. Then I ran six miles. Now I’m up to
nine miles. So that’s the way I am. I’m there, I’m constant, and I always want more. And I’m
planning to run the Cleveland half-marathon, not the complete marathon, this coming March.
And that’s something I do. Nobody else has to know about it, nobody is controlling how
much I run, nobody else is seeing, taking the time, or anything, but I’m there, it’s constant,
and I see the evolution of it. Each time I go running, it’s a challenge. I never know if I’m
gonna make, I’m gonna do the six miles I intend to do. And on the way, I was like, “I wanna
quit.” And I’m like, “Nope, you’re not gonna quit, you’re gonna go ahead and do it.”

So running to me is a parallel of how you should lead yourself. You don’t need to go all the
way the first time. You go baby steps. One step at a time. And life, those baby steps, will lead
you to where you need to go. You need to take more baby steps, eventually you will evolve.
You will take more. When I started running, started first walking, then a little bit faster, then
a little bit faster, and that’s how you should. You don’t jump to the expert level. You go
through different phases, and that’s exactly what my life has been in my professional life.

V: 13.1 miles this March.

G: Yeah. So I’m up to nine miles. So here I am, we’ll see where it’s gonna take me.

V: Very exciting. Good luck with that, it will be fun. How about outside interests that have
a shaping effect on your career? Any such ideas to add?

G: Outside interests. Well, I like sports, running, jogging, dancing, of course, but that have
influenced my professional life … What do you mean by outside influences?

V: The running is one example of an outside interest or an influence. I was just curious if
there was anything that we hadn’t talked about that …

G: I like movies. I like very much watching movies.

I enjoy very much reading. I also dedicate a lot of time to reading math books. I have this
passion for Gödel, the incompleteness theorem. And I’m reading a book by Rudy Rucker
called Infinity and the Mind. And it talks about how math, the basic concept of math, because
I’m always worried of math concepts, which are the basis of any science. So people have not
looked well at the foundations, so we need to be careful because we’re building things and maybe foundations are not as strong as they should be.

I have a passion for set theory, trying to understand it, and puzzles, Gardiner, old logic puzzles, to get your head thinking, to be able to look at things in a different way. Because we tend to always look at things in the same way, have a routine. So I try to put myself to do puzzles, so we can look at things in a different way. I love reading logic books. So the one I’m reading now is Rudy Rucker, and philosophy. All that influences me a lot. Popper, Aristotle, Plato. I love any book that has to do with philosophy. Now I’m reading a book on Western philosophy by Russell, Bertrand Russell, which is a guy who influenced very much AI. So I know a little bit of AI because of that, and I’m reading to see the great philosophers, the way they looked and approached problems. Because I want to be able to look at problems the way they did, empirically, theoretically, doubting, anything that has … Kant, Popper, people who were … positivism, things like that.

[87:10]

V: Interesting. I’m glad we talked about that.

G: Yeah, I forgot about my passion for philosophy.

V: It’s come up before when you talked about your Jesuit mentor.

G: Yeah, yeah, I said philosophy for … while I was teaching I did actually … I started my master’s in philosophy. And then that’s where I got in touch with the Greeks, with Plato, Aristotle read politics, where I read the books. Justice is a very nice concept. How to make things equally…

Economics is a thing I also like to read about. So I read Galbraith sometimes from Harvard. And there’s some papers about economics that says that people are usually very selfish, they don’t wanna share. And there’s some other economics who think sharing is natural in people. So I like to view things, how they’re viewing economics from a perspective that people do like to share, they’re good, thinking all people, under the assumption that all people are good, and the other one saying all people are basically selfish, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” sometimes, they call it.

V: If you could give advice to a young woman just starting out, what would it be?

G: Be persistent. Don’t give up. Go for what you want, not what everybody else wants.

V: Certainly been a theme in your life, I think …

G: Oh yes. Of course you have to compromise. Before you go, you have to think. You have to make a decision. Don’t just run up there and say, “I’m going for it, bye-bye everybody!” You think and say, “Well I’m not affecting anybody, I’m not hurting anybody. This is what I want to do,” go do it. But first think, and then do.
V: If there’s one decision that you could change in your life up to this point, is there one, and what would it be?

G: Oh. I don’t know, I think … probably the decision I wanted to change was I should believe more in God. I think I’m very grateful to what God has given me, and I have not been very caring to God, so somehow along the way be more faithful and have more faith in God, that He’s doing some good and He eventually will get there. But all other decisions, I pretty much … if they hadn’t happened, I would not have been led to this moment. So I’m very, very happy with … of course not everything has worked out, but the things that have not worked out have been to help you work things out later on in life.

V: Is there any other story that you want to tell so that it’s going to be remembered?

G: Any other story? I think that how I met you, in a van, going back from the SIGCSE conference. How you influenced my sister. She still asks me, she goes, “Did you tell her (and this is a good time) that I said ‘hi’?” You influenced her a lot, and it was really nice because you got her involved. I wanted her to be involved, but you also motivated her. And she still writes to me, “When are we gonna do the paper thing?” Finish your comps, and we’ll finish up the paper.

How I got my job, how I finished my dissertation, it’s incredible, it was one thing after another … it was heavenly. It was one thing after another how I got to the Grace Hopper, my paper got accepted.

The sequence of these things that had been happening to me since I graduated. Finding my boyfriend, it was out of Heaven, out of the blue. I never expected it. It took me out of surprise. My boyfriend works as a professor at Youngstown State University. I met him the first day. I walked into the meeting, and I had no idea, I had no clue, and I had met him before. Because he actually works with the person who told me to get the job at Youngstown State University. So I tell him, “I knew you before I even knew you” (because she talked about him and how they worked together) “and I didn’t know it was you!” And then I went to the interview. He had been offered to interview me, so we would have met through the interview, but somebody else from his department interviewed me. So when the person was talking about geography, I always thought about this guy who was on the search committee interviewing me. And how we met, he wanted a pen, I had my door open, he came in, and that’s how everything got started. So I think it was also heavenly. He teaches at the same school, I knew that I couldn’t have a relationship with somebody outside. He has been through the tenure process, he knows what it goes through, he’s been very supportive. I think we made a very, very good match. I don’t know what it’s gonna lead to but the way I met him, it was heavenly, it was really out of the blue. It completely … I was never ever expecting to meet somebody like that. And Youngstown, the first day, it was incredible.

V: It does sound incredible.

G: And I met his family, I met his parents. And he also has the same religion as I do, which is very difficult. In Venezuela, everybody is Catholic, but in the United States there’s many
different religions. I’m a very religious person, he has the same religion. He has the same
goals as I do. He’s in the same conditions, we’re on the same page, which is very difficult to
find. He loves books, so he likes going to Borders for an afternoon. He doesn’t drink, I don’t
drink too much. He likes having water, I drink water. It’s very hard to find a person that you
share so many things with. He loves movies, I love movies. I think it’s just heavenly. Maybe
it won’t work out, but the way we met, definitely, it’s heavenly. I have to …

V: I think it’s wonderful for now.

G: For now it is! I don’t know later. But what starts good usually ends good.

V: Anything else that you’d like to share before we finish this interview?

G: That you can have your life, that you can have your profession, and then you can also have
time for you. Because women, and I include myself, forget about ourselves so many times.
So my recommendation is always, always, always dedicate some time to you. We’re taught
to be nurturers. You can’t nurture somebody if you’re on the floor. So you have to take time
off and do whatever—jogging, running, watching movies, computers, whatever—whatever
fascinates you, whatever turns you on and nurtures you. Don’t wait for people to give it to
you. You have to give it to yourself. Don’t wait for others to give it to you. Even if you’re
married with children, always dedicate time to yourself. Even if it’s little, but dedicate time
to yourself.

V: Wonderful. This has just been absolutely energizing. Thank you so much Graciela.

G: No, thank you for interviewing me and telling you my story.

[94:38]