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Interviewed by Kate Denney

Where did you grow up and where did you do your undergrad?

I am from Peru. I am from the central lands of Peru from a province called Concepción, which is located in the main agricultural valley in Peru, called the Mantaro Valley. I grew up there on a family farm my father owned. It is considered one of the biggest in the region, around 100 hectares. We produced potatoes, corn, legumes and raised dairy cattle (Brown Swiss and Holstein). I grew up in that environment. My oldest brother also studied agronomy, the second one followed him. We are a family of five and I was the only woman studying agronomy. My mom was a pharmacologist, she studied at the Sam Marcos University, and my dad did his studies in Argentina at the University of La Plata, Buenos Aires. But as I grew up in this environment, I also engaged with the people who came to work on the farm. We had around 100 people working in the farm, and they came from the highlands. That is the reason that I decided to start studying agronomy, not to continue the work on the farm, but to work with these people because I knew that they came from communities where they had plenty of natural resources and they are part of Indigenous communities, particularly the Quechua and Wanka communities. Then, I had the benefit of being selected as one of the scholars by the International Potato Centre in Peru and I got a scholarship with them to do my undergraduate thesis. I finished my Bachelor's in Agronomy at the National University of the Center of Peru, and I went to the International Potato Centre, and I started working in the taxonomy department as an intern. When I decided to do my undergraduate thesis with them, I was part of the physiology department. I was with them for three years, I worked with international scientists, working in potatoes, and producing new varieties for climate stress. But, in this work I also worked a lot with Indigenous communities, because the International Potato Centre has a long history of engagement with these communities. They introduced the farmer field schools in these communities, and we were doing research with the communities - what we now call collaborative participatory research. With that idea of working at a more applied level, I decided to do my thesis with these communities and International Potato Centre, to benefit through both bodies of knowledge, Indigenous and scientific knowledge.

What led you to Guelph? What made you choose to come to Canada and the Ontario Agricultural College in specific?

There were two reasons that I decided to come to Canada. In my work, the literature that I was reading at that time came mostly from University of Guelph academics,

and my dream was to come to Canada, to go to Guelph. At that time, my brother-in-law was doing his PhD at the University of Alberta in Animal Science, but he moved to Guelph to finalise his PhD. The first thing that I did when I came here was to ask my brother to drive me to Guelph, and we went to Guelph, and I was amazed by it. Not only the infrastructure, but also all the work that was done in the Agricultural College in plant science. The first thing that I did is engage with Dr. Alan Sullivan, and I asked him, "I want to be your student. I want to continue doing my master's with you." and he said "OK, Silvia, sit down and let's talk. What do you want your research topic to be?" and I said to him, "I want to work with illiterate people in agriculture and work in local agricultural innovation" and he said, "Oh my gosh, with me, you will be in the lab all the time and, you will have some fieldwork, but not as you expect." So, he connected me with professors in the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development and connected me with Dr. Sally Humphries and Dr. James Mahone, and the minute that I talked to Dr. James Mahone and Dr. Al Lauzon, I knew that I had to do my master's in capacity development and extension. I knew that it was going to be difficult because I came with a background focused more on the natural sciences, but I accepted that challenge because I was sure that I was going to get the best education that I aimed to have.

Did you have any chance to visit Guelph before you decided where to study?

Yes. I remember we landed in the crop science department, and I talked with Dr. Souza-Machado, and he directed me to Dr. Sullivan. I went to Guelph to talk to them ten times before coming to Guelph. I loved going to university. It was my dream to study at Guelph. It seemed so far from me that I was going to study at Guelph, that I was going to learn from all professors, but this time when I visited, I could feel it was close. I had to work for this and to get the right advice to achieve my goals. After I met with Dr. Sullivan. I decided to study capacity development and extension because it was the topic that I knew I practised, but not theoretically, since I had never taken a course in that matter.

How did you feel as an international student at the Ontario Agricultural College? Did you feel welcomed to when you got to Guelph? What was that experience like?

The first time that I went to the reception, when I asked for Dr. Souza-Machado, and talked to Dr. Sullivan, Dr Mahone, and Dr. Lauzon I felt that the opportunities were there. I felt a sense of relief, but it was something unknown to me. Since I was coming from Peru, I was used to a different type of education, but because I was welcomed, I felt welcome, and I felt safe. I said to myself, "I have to do it." I think I felt this way because of the way that I was received, the way that I engaged with professors, and got all the information that I needed. I felt supported, and I felt safe, which is very important for an international student at the University of Guelph or any other Canadian university.

What year did you start your master's program at Guelph?

I started my masters in 2006. I finished my masters in 2008. Then, in September of 2008, I started my PhD studies, finishing in December 2012.

Did you live on campus while studying at the Ontario Agricultural College?

No. I came to Guelph as a landed immigrant, and in order to do that I had to work for six years to bring over my family, my husband, and my two small children. I lived off campus with my family. We lived in Guelph while I was doing my master's and my PhD studies.

Did you enjoy living in the City of Guelph?

Oh yes, I loved it. It was quiet. It was welcoming. The city is warm, it welcomes people, especially students. I remember that we used to go have coffee at the Red Brick Café. We would go to the library, and even though I was doing my master's, I had a good network with my colleagues. We were four master students who worked together, and learned together, and we met to share our knowledge and ideas. I knew when I came to the University of Guelph, we would be learning more about different theoretical bodies of knowledge that could complement with my technical professional capacities, so I needed to read and learn a lot. I needed to reflect, and analyse, and be critical. Which at the time, I was not. But I had support at the Ontario Agricultural College. I had professors advise me on how to write better. There were services I could access to improve my English, to improve my capacity as a scholar, and it helped me a lot.

Was there a service or support that was most important to you or that you found helped you the most?

Yes, I think it was the support of my professors the Ontario Agricultural College. I had support from my advisor who was Dr. Jim Mahone. During my master's and my PhD, I had academic support from Dr. Alan Lauzon who recently retired. Working with them strengthened my capacity as an academic and as a person.

You mentioned your relationships with your colleagues and your professors, are you still friends with anybody that you met with while doing your master's and Ph.D. at Guelph?

Yes, I am. I still relate to them and talk to them. Three colleagues from my master's program are very successful scholars. Dr. Ashlee Cunsolo at Memorial University; Dr. Shery Lee Harper is a research chair in food security at the University of Alberta and Dawson Bridger, Director in the Ontario Heritage Fund. Dr. Shery Lee Harper is representing Canada in the climate change component of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Also, I keep in touch with all my colleagues from my

master's and PhD studies. We interact a lot and exchange academic material. It's a relationship that is built on professionalism, respect, and admiration, but also support.

Were you involved in any clubs, extracurriculars, or events while you were on campus?

Yes, we were engaged with the City of Guelph. Well, we organised and supported different activities, especially with Dr. Ashlee Cunsolo. I was part of the international program. I was a part of extracurricular activities with Dr. Lynn Mitchell, and I have to say that she was a great supporter to me, even though I was not technically an international student, because I got my permanent residence visa before I came to Canada, I was still part of all the activities that she organised. She was also supportive of me in organizing extracurricular activities myself. She supported us in organizing international talks, and I was part of these international talks with guest speakers not only from Canadian universities but also international universities. Dr. Stuart McCook and Dr. Lynn Mitchell always invited me to talk with international partners who come to the university as well, the international program has been supportive of me. They were there to support me in presenting research results and engagement with different groups at an international level.

How did studying at the Ontario Agricultural College compare to your experience doing your undergraduate degree at the National University of the Center of Peru?

There are several differences. I was amazed with the resources that we had to conduct our work, and the library. At the time in Peru, the libraries were smaller and didn't have the capacity that they have now. At the University of Guelph, the relationships I had with professors were very professional, academic, ethical, and with professionalism, and I want I transmit that to my students too. I feel that I was safe, and that I was confident that I was right in choosing University of Guelph to do my studies.

Now that you're here at Guelph as a professor, what are the biggest changes on campus that you've noticed compared to when you started at Guelph as a student in 2006?

Well, the big difference is that there are more students than were before. When I started there were not too many international students. Now we have higher percentage of international students, which is great that the university has become more diverse, and more inclusive, and that is demonstrated in the different nationalities of our students. They offer more opportunities to students to have a better education. Access to services has improved a lot. I have become aware of more services than when I first started. The support from the different levels of the university is better and is more accessible to students. We support our students, for example, in the Master Program in Rural Planning and Development, we work with our students to organise town halls to see how they are doing and hear from our

students. At the Ontario Agricultural College, we connect our students who may have interdisciplinary backgrounds with professors. So, the service is a network, but it is well structured from the individual programme level to the university level and even going beyond, outside the University of Guelph.

What kind of research did you do while you attended the Ontario Agricultural College?

Both my master's and my PhD research was on the topic of integrating gender in agriculture. During my master's I was working with rural women involved in microfinance, specifically Indigenous women involved in microfinance in Peru. My PhD studies were also on Indigenous women in local innovation but working in value chains of native potatoes. That research was with Indigenous women working with the initiative called the Potato Initiative and they were adding value to the product for it to work in niche markets. My responsibility was to work with them to investigate how they adapted to these new technologies, but considering their knowledge, the local and Indigenous knowledge and how it was 'braided' with scientific knowledge.

Did you always know you wanted to work with Indigenous communities?

Yes, I always knew that I was going to work with them. It was for that reason when I finished my studies in Guelph, I accepted an invitation to do a postdoctoral fellowship in agricultural innovation systems and work with local farmers and Indigenous groups in Africa, Asia, and the Solomon Islands. I worked with them in Malaysia for three years at the WorldFish Centre. We implemented the research, development approach and the gender transformative approach for the first time in and agricultural research.

What made you want to come back to Guelph as a professor?

Canada is home for me and, it is where I identify with. After I finished my post-doctoral position with WorldFish in Malaysia, I was invited to work with a Dutch agency, called the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), and I also did research in agriculture and gender, I was there for three years too. But I lived alone. My family was here, and my dream was always to come back to Guelph again. There is nothing wrong with dreaming. First, when I was in Peru, I dreamt and said to myself, "Oh my gosh, I want to study at Guelph. Well, would it be possible? My English? Other aspects that I will need to improve, would it be feasible or not?" But, through time I achieved it. As I was working in Malaysia, travelling to different countries, and doing research with different scholars from different universities in the Netherlands, I found myself wanting to come back to teaching and to have an academic life. I wanted to work with the students. I want to be a mentor, but also to share all my experiences on an international level from an academic standpoint. When this opportunity was presented to me, I had an interview, and I had my presentation to the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development. I felt that it was my

place, but I was also nervous to get the results to see if I was accepted by the university as a professor.

When you first came to Guelph, were your husband and children able to come with you?

No, they didn't come at first. The first year I was alone because I had to apply for a visa for them. I left my family for one year. My youngest son was 10 months old and the oldest one was 4 years old. After that, my husband and my children came, and the family was complete.

Was it difficult for you being away from your family?

It was very difficult. It was very difficult because my youngest son was ten months old when I left. We agreed as a family that it was the right sacrifice for us. When I was here, I had to work also. I had to get two jobs in order to sponsor them. But I think it is worth it and it is the reason that I empathise with international students. I know that for them it is not easy. They are separated from their family. They are encountering a new style of life. But what I say is we have to be open. Canada is a beautiful country. Canadian people are welcoming and are warm. Engage with different people. Have the life that you want to have, but it will be step by step. Nothing comes overnight. Academically it's the same. I have students who have different jobs. I went through the same situation. But when you are finished, you will see how happy you will be, how strong and resilient you will be. You will value every moment that you live during your life as a student.

Do you have any favourite memories from your time at Guelph?

Oh, there are multiple. I loved my classes with Dr. Al Lauzon, they helped me understand the theoretical side of what I already had in practice. I had a good experience with my advisor, Dr. James Mahone. He was an outgoing person, the courses that he taught were facilitation and communication and conflict management. He was honest with me, and he said, "you need to strengthen your facilitation skills and your communication skills". The first class I had with him, I had to present on how to work in group dynamics, and because I was not aware of how he managed the course, I just memorized everything as I did in my studies in Peru. I arrived to the class and I had 4-5 classmates that presented, and they were so confident talking, walking around the room and explaining about their topics. In my case, I forgot about everything, because I was nervous. I stood up in front of that group and I was ashamed. I was talking about the topic, but I was sure, at that moment, it didn't make any sense to them. I wanted to run. I wanted to leave and say, "OK, Silvia, you go from here and you escape, and you disappear forever". After a while I said to myself, "no, I worked so hard to be here. I feel so happy here. I have to work on this, and everything will become better." That was that was the turning point for me.