

[00:00:00.0]

Renee Alexander Craft: So tell me about the first, how you, when you were a girl, how did you encounter Portobelo and how did you become attached to Portobelo?

[00:00:11.8]

Sandra Eleta: Well in the larger scheme of things, I think that there are things for you in life. I don't know whether to call them destiny or what, but there are things for you, and there are things that are not for you, no matter how you try. But I think Portobelo was on my path, and why, but that's the way I feel.

[00:00:29.9]

SE: So when I was about a 5-year-old girl my father said he would bring me here to meet this person that saved my grandfather's life. So, you know, my mother was terrified of my father to take me anywhere because he would always . . . he was always like a free spirit, a bohemian person, you know. He loved boxers, music, and my mother was extremely like a Victorian lady - extremely conservative, and she was really in panic every time my father took me somewhere. So my father would he would tell her, oh I'm going to take her to the Spanish embassy so to visit the ambassador or whatever. So my mother would dress me with all these laces and ribbons, and I would end up in the legs of this beautiful old man who saved my grandfathers life and he would tell me the story of how he saved him. Then he had . . . I remember he had this rocking chair and he would rock me and sing to me in French because he was from the French Antilles. And then many, many years afterwards I, you know, I went to the States to study I mean and then I went back to Spain to live with my family. And then when I came back to Panama and I came to Portobelo to remember, you know, to remember a thing from my childhood, a landscape from my childhood . . . they told me, I went immediately to the house, and they told me it was closed because he died. And then I said, but now he didn't have any family, to whom this house belong? It's going to remain locked? And they said, you should ask your father because I think he left this house to your father. So that's how I got this house. I asked him, what are your plans for this house? And he said to me, you know, I don't have any plans. I said, would you mind if I, if I, if you give it to me if you don't have any other plans? He said, but what are you going to do? Said what I'm going to do? I'm going to stay here and live, that's what I'm going to do. It was like a pull. I don't know what happened to me. And then I had to stay there. I locked myself there for about a year. And people, you know, would say I was totally crazy. There was no electricity. The bathroom was out in the ocean and still, you know, Darcy, had beautiful guayaberas and I would wear them you know? There was some kind of connection. I cannot explain why. So people, friends of mine, would come and visit me and the experience would grow . . . kept on growing. So then I started photographing. In that perspective I started photographing . . . as a diary, you know, the people who were around me. I would photograph the ones that attracted me or I had some type of connection. So that's how, you know, that's how I started.

[00:03:23.0]

Lindsey Foster Thomas: Who was that man? I mean what is the story of how he saved your grandfather?

[00:03:26.6]

SE: Because my, they were working in the farm and he was hit, I mean he was cut with a machete. As he was bleeding to death and he put a tourniquet. And he rowed him into Colon. Can you imagine rowing to Colon while my father (sic) was bleeding to death? And he, well he became a hero like to my father because he saved his life. Rowing to Colon. So, that's how, you know . . .

[00:03:52.1]

LFT: But he left this house to your father?

[00:03:54.1]

SE: Yes. He left the house to my family because he didn't have any family of his own. He was from the French Antilles, and so he was always considered a foreigner. Someone who, you know, was a foreigner and people, you know, even where, you know, he had a white beard, was very tall, beautiful, beautiful man . . . a French accent, so he was totally different from the rest of the town. You know. So that's how I came here

[00:04:18.4]

LFT: And your father didn't want to, to live in the house in Portobelo?

[00:04:22.8]

SE: My father never lived in the house. He came to visit but never dreamt of living in this house. And he was really amazed that I, that I wanted to stay there because it was really, really like a one, two room house. You know, very sort of a primitive house. The shower was almost outside. The bathroom was outside on the waterfront. So it was, it didn't have any comfort, you know. He would never think about living there himself. So what, you know. I had this pull and I needed to stay. It was the first time in my life that I had a feeling of staying in a place because I was always traveling. I did a whole lot of photographing, that I worked for an agency in New York so I had to move and then but when I got there it was like a grounding experience, you know. I said this is it. Like when you fall in love and say well this is it. I guess that was it.

[00:05:23.8]

LFT: But you, like the French man, were sort of an outsider. I mean you spoke the language but you weren't from Portobelo, you didn't grow up here.

[00:05:32.28]

SE: Yeah I was like a, like a, yeah, like a misfit perhaps. Like he was . . . a misfit also. We both had, we were misfits in a sense, no?

[00:05:42.6]

LFT: So did acceptance from the community come easily?

[00:05:45.5]

SE: Well it came through the children. Because my neighbor was the first person that I met and she became my, like my family. Sheila and her sons. They became like my extended family. At the beginning she was like, oh this weird woman what is she doing here, you know? But the children didn't have any prejudice. They would come home and then I had like a battery radio I

put some music, I have flowers, candles, it was like a, and I put some road rocks, like, you know color . . . how you say . . . like . . . well things that I put to create an atmosphere. And they were enchanted with it, you know? So the children were the bridge to the community and slowly, you know, it began to happen. The integration.

[00:06:34.0]

RAC: So, talk about some of your first experiences with Congo culture here.

[00:06:41.6]

SE: I remember the first person that hit me was Longaniza. Oh, as a matter of fact you have to get in touch with Longaniza's daughter, Paloma. Have you ever thought about Paloma?

[00:06:53.0]

RAC: Paloma. She has the book. I've seen Paloma. Yes.

[00:06:55.2]

SE: Yes. Paloma. Get in touch with her.

[00:06:56.8]

RAC: Ok. I've talked to her.

[00:06:58.0]

SE: Soledad knows about her.

[00:06:59.4]

RAC: OK

[00:07:00.7]

SE: So Longaniza, to me when I first saw him in alley, he has this magic, this poetry. It really reminded me, his humor, his sophisticated humor, like Charlie Chaplin. I always thought that Longa was a Charlie Chaplin of the Congos. He had such a poetry in his humor. He was such a . . . the way he danced, the way he moved, the way, the remarks he said . . . there were many levels in his jokes. So that was the first experience that I had with a Congo. Longaniza.

[00:07:32.6]

RAC: And how did you get involved with cultural preservation in Portobelo? I mean when did you start?

[00:07:38.7]

SE: Because, at the beginning, it was not, I was not aware that I wanted anything of the preservation. I just wanted to, there was some, how do you say, admiration for this culture that I found people to be extremely free and they have this strength, this power, this love of freedom for to assert in their ways. Because Portobelo is like a self-enclosed community. There were like very separate from the rest. That's one of the reasons I think they've preserved their culture, no? But it was so, I cannot put it into words, but it was like a fascination. They way they expressed themselves, they danced, it belonged to another level of experience that I couldn't tell at the

beginning from where it came from. I knew of course that it had come from Africa but I wasn't so much aware of the meaning, of the meaning of it because they were not aware of it either. They would never refer themselves as coming from slaves. It was like a degrading thought. But when there was a twist about, not degradation or victimization, but of assertiveness. That made the twist, how do you say, the shift.

[00:08:49.0]

RAC: Right

[00:08:49.6]

SE: Of not looking at themselves as descendants of slaves, but as people who conquered their freedom and reassert their own traditions and their dignity. So it began with time. It was a process of reaching out. For example, my photos are, that's what I wanted to take out, to get the feeling of that dignity, of that powerful dignity that I tried to convey in my images.

[00:09:18.7]

RAC: And so from that, how did you get involved with the . . . talk about your role in the Festival de los Diablos. How did you and the community become involved together to make that happen? What inspired it?

[00:09:35.6]

SE: Yeah, I think the Festival de Diablos, like all the things that have happened here, are, were like a process that was unfolding. I cannot say because of this, because of that. But it was a process that was unfolding, like the beginning, the Cooperative of Women doing their clothing. And that I got the inspiration by looking at the quilts flying from the branches of the tree. And I said, these are beautiful quilts. If they have this sense of color and design they might be able to do something else with it. So that branched out. About what they happened with the Cooperative of Women, with the Taller, and I think the Festival de Diablo is the same thing of coming out as a process. People from the community came to me and said, well do you think you can, you can support us to create the Festival de Diablos. And I said well you know, I'll see what I can do. So we started with \$500. And today it's a festival is so big that is has grown so much that it takes much more than that to put it together. It has been quite successful. You know, for many years.

[00:10:45.5]

RAC: And what year did it start? What year did the festival start?

[00:10:49.6]

SE: Um. I don't remember precisely. Perhaps 2000, the year 2000, more or less. 13 years ago. 14 years ago.

[00:10:58.4]

RAC: OK. Will you talk a little bit more about the Taller Portobelo focused on the Women's Cooperative, and how, how that shifted between the Women's Cooperative and then expanded or shifted toward what we now know as Taller Portobelo and the visual artists?

[00:11:17.0]

SE: Yeah it was a totally different experience from the women to the men, you know. The women, it was a large cooperative at the beginning. There was a friend of mine, an incredible artist that inspired in the nature and the legends of Portobelo. He began to, to design for them. So he did his design but under spirit and became very famous so they even exported to Spain, to the States. But it became very intricate and so it was not commercial because they had to spend a lot of time by each piece.

[00:11:52.0]

RAC: OK.

[00:11:52.7]

SE: And they began, you know, a little bit to, this control dramas about wanting to control and others taking the designs elsewhere and then they began to fight within themselves.

[00:12:05.0]

RAC: Ok.

[00:12:06.0]

SE: So it was a very complex experience. But it lasted for about, lasted for six, seven years. Eight years. And as a matter of fact there was a last attempt about three years ago to go back to it. So they were selling it in different stores here in Panama about three years ago. But that, that experience is over and then came the men with Arturo through the invasion of the States here in '89. '89. So when Arturo came here, that's when the experience of the Taller started. The paintings.

[00:12:46.9]

RAC: Ok.

[00:12:48.2]

SE: Yeah. He limited himself to stretching the canvas and they would . . . it was amazing how this unfolded. It was like getting to their, how do you say, como se dice, la memoria historica, the historic memories of getting . . . if you would see the work in those days, you see them in the bathroom of the red house.

[00:13:08.7]

RAC: Yeah.

[00:13:09.1]

SE: That's how they have . . . if you pay attention . . . and the faces

[00:13:14.3]

RAC: Yeah.

[00:13:14.4]

SE: How they have moved from the casa roja.

[00:13:17.4]

RAC: Yeah.

[00:13:17.6]

SE: To the yellow house to here. This is the last stage. How they have evolved.

[00:13:21.8]

RAC: Right.

[00:13:21.9]

SE: So it was a process.

[00:13:23.5]

RAC: Right

[00:13:24.5]

SE: Yes. And how they came in touch with their symbolism and their imagery. Probably it was everything in their subconscious, you know. So that's how they brought it into the surface.

[00:13:36.6]

RAC: And what is the relationship between that process and the Festival de las Polleras. How did the Festival de las Polleras begin?

[00:13:45.2]

SE: Because that was another idea of people here, you know. They said well there is a Festival de la Pollera. Because the pollera, the meaning of the pollera is like . . . pollera means pollo, from the word pollo. It's a little pollo, no? Probably polleras people would carry pollos in their skirts. I don't know. But they refer to la pollera in this magnificent, Spanish type of queenly dresses with gold and, you know, from the Pacific coast. You know, there's a lot of inspiration from the Spanish. But the pollera conga is much more of the quilt idea of the one I mentioned turned into a pollera. Like a quilted skirt. So they said again, they came to me and said, Sandra, you know with the Festival of the Diablos has been so successful what about if we do a festival de la pollera. It was last year. No four months, five months ago. So I said, oh, well let me think. So well, I said, well there is a diablo, which is masculine, so probably, why don't we focus on the feminine energy and have the water coming in, all these women coming here by water. Like they did before. So they, the most, it was the most beautiful thing. All these boats with ribbons and flowers and plantains and animals, you know. All these women coming from, with their, of course with their man, no, but women reigning. So it was very sort of woman oriented festival. That I think complimented with the Festival de Diablos.

[00:15:14.8]

RAC: Ok. And then how does the -- this is the last question. How does that history relate to the founding of now the Casa de la Cultura Congo? And what are your hopes for the Casa de la Cultural Congo?

[00:15:28.7]

SE: I would hope that the Casa de la Cultura Congo would be like a, how you say, como un recipiente, like a, how you say in English?

[00:15:37.2]

RAC: Like a repository.

[00:15:38.8]

SE: Repository. A repository of all the work that has been done until now, you know. That takes a lot of love and a lot of caring. Like anything in life that grows, you know. You have to put a lot of love and a lot of attention and I'm sure they will give that love to that project, you know.

[00:15:58.7]

RAC: Perfecto. Muchisima gracias.

[00:16:00.3]

SE: Thank you

[00:16:00.9]

LFT: Can I ask one more question? Do you remember the first child you took a picture of in Portobelo?

[00:16:06.1]

SE: Oh the first child. The first child? Because the first photos I took from Josefa. She was a healer. And that's the very first essay I did. And the first child . . . to tell you the truth I've taken so many photos of children.

[00:16:23.2]

LFT: Or the earliest one you remember.

[00:16:24.3]

SE: The earliest one I remember were the one from my neighbor. Shelia's sons. Virgilio. I'm sure that you have met Virgilio. From Virgilio, his brothers. Those were the first children I photograph. Shelia's.

[00:16:37.8]

LFT: How old were they then? How old are they now?

[00:16:39.6]

SE: If you see Virgilio you can tell the difference in ages. They were about . . . Virgilio . . . would be . . . que . . . eight years . . . around eight years. And now he's, what, 30 years? Something like that. You know Virgilio?

[00:16:53.9]

RAC: I don't know, cause they came a little later.

[00:16:56.0]

SE: Oh.

[00:16:56.3]

RAC: We know Virgilio. You may see Virgilio, I'm not sure. I can show you a picture. But you, but um, hopefully we'll get a chance to interview Dulce and Dulce was one of the earliest children you took a picture of too.

[00:17:07.2]

SE: Oh yes. Totally right. She was like my star. She was like, I almost, emotionally, I adopted her in my heart, no, like a child. It was like, the way she evolved was she had a very tough childhood. Very, very difficult, dysfunctional home and she pulled through. And now she has the most beautiful daughter. It was a really, I'm so so happy with what her life turned out to be. It was very difficult at the beginning but then, you know, it turned out beautifully.

[00:17:41.9]

(Conversation between SE, RAC and LFT. LFT asks SE if she can take a photograph of SE and RAC.)

[00:18:26.4]