

Transcript: Interview with Gisel Urena

Freedom House 75th Anniversary Intergenerational Interviewing Project

Interview by **Kevin Williams**

Audio-tech support by **Alex Mella**

Date of Interview: **Friday, February 9, 2024**

Location: **Freedom House, Boston, Massachusetts**

Length of Interview: 22:02

Transcript:

Auto-transcribed by OtterAI

Edited by Greg Lord

The transcript is a lightly edited version of the audio interview.

Speakers:

KW: Kevin Williams

GU: Gisel Urena

AM: Alex Mella

Bio:

Gisel Ureña, a Freedom House Alumni, most recently graduated May of 2022 from Brandeis University with two Bachelors of Arts in Computer Science and Business. She is a first-generation high school student, first-generation college student; carrying many “first” titles has shaped her commitment to serve and make a difference on purpose with purpose. She was born in the Dominican Republic and came to the United States at the age of 10 years old. Gisel started her first business at the age of 15 years old in Makeup Artistry, began her own brand in personal development, fitness and wellness at the age of 17 years old, started a YouTube Talkshow/Podcast at the age of 20 years old and worked many jobs tirelessly throughout high school and college to support herself and family. She is a mission and purpose driven leader focused on embodying the change she wishes to see in the world to inspire the generations to come. Gisel is extremely active in the community involvement and has been apart and served FirstGen Ahead, Myra Kraft Transitional Year Program, Hispanic Scholarship Fund, Antioch Waltham, Student Support Services Program, Snowden International, of course Freedom House and many more. She is known as an inspirational, change-maker public speaker. She

was nominated to speak at the Global Leadership Summit in the Boston Chapter, Champions of Freedom, and many more. Most importantly, Gisel is a woman of faith.

Note on audio: Existing AUP3 file in Project folder had issues with audio that were fixable. (Audio was set to full volume and entirely on one of the left/right channels.) I have fixed those settings and re-exported it as:

GiselUrena_Kevin_Williams_WAV-Corrected.wav

KW 0:00

Hello, my name is Kevin Williams. I'm a junior coach at Freedom House. I'm a student at Franklin [Cummings Tech]. Today is February 8, February 9th 2024 at 12:16 I'm interviewing Gisel...

GU 00:24

Urena.

KW 00:25

Urena. For the Freedom House 75th Artifact Project using Audacity voice recorder located at Freedom House in Boston, Massachusetts. Gisel Urena, please introduce yourself. Include your job title and the other information you want to add.

GU 00:45

Yeah, thank you so much, Kevin, for having me and interviewing me. My name is Gisel Urena, and I went to [Snowden] International for high school, and for college I went to Brandeis University. I graduated with a computer science and business degree. And after graduating, I worked for Liberty Mutual as a Cybersecurity Engineer/Software Developer. Right now I am pivoting into a new career, where I'll be working for Schneider Electric to win their leadership technology program. And yeah, I'm excited for what's ahead.

KW 01:28

All right. Do you want to talk about any impactful moments from Freedom House?

GU 01:35

Absolutely. I mean, impactful is an understatement. Because Freedom House has been the door to where I am today. Truly. When I was in high school, I used to be homeless for a very long time. And I almost dropped out so many times in high school, and I worked so many jobs. I mean, my story, I feel like I've said it so many times that I don't even know what to share right now. But when it was senior year, I believe junior year/senior year of high school that everybody had, like, already applied to their colleges. And they were so excited. I was the only one that had never even looked into that because I didn't think it was an option for me. And I remember it was a day an Admissions Office officer came in to speak to the senior class. And she's asking questions, and while she's asking the questions, people are raising their hands. And there was

me in the back of the room, now raising my hand and I started to feel like super small and just everything felt like it was just falling apart. My dreams, my goals, my aspirations, even the things that I didn't know I wanted. And that's when I stepped out of the room because I was asked to leave the room because I started to break down. And the counselor told me come to my office, or go to my office. And in the office, there was three people from Freedom House, and it was Nicola Walker, and Linda, during that time, and I remember I didn't know who they were. We're just in the midst as I was walking to his office. And when I started yelling at the counselor telling him like Nobody here has noticed that I've been homeless for so long. Nobody here has asked me or seen me or noticed what I've been experiencing and I kept yelling at him. "I do want to go to college. I do want to future I do want to fulfill my dreams." And that's when he asked multiple people to come into the room. And yeah, that was the beginning of my history with Freedom House. They helped me apply to college, they helped me graduate college, they helped me even after I graduated in my life and navigating the workspace and just everything. They've just been by my side along the way. And now I'm able to be part of the board, and I get to serve. I get to give back. I get to be what I never thought it was going to be.

KW 04:22

That's nice. Do you want to talk about kinda like what the beginning of when you did start working at Freedom House. Like, how was that like? Something like how it changed the course?

GU 04:34

Absolutely. Well, it all started by me having a coach like yourself, and my coach was Walker. She would help me walk me through the processes of college applications. What's a college essay? What's a major? What's a minor? What do I want to do with what I aspire to do? And from there, we started to see, okay, how are your grades? And I wasn't the best student, obviously. I was surviving. I didn't focus in the classroom. And so I started to have opportunities to take college level courses at Freedom House that gave me college credits. So when I went to college, I already had like, up to 12 credits, or eight, I believe, credits already done. I mean, four credits is like \$3,000. So Freedom House, was just that for me. And then over time, I became more involved. And then I started doing boot camps here where I'm serving the community, then I started fundraising. Then I started, you know, doing leadership role conversations with our students. And then you just saw how I continue to evolve, then I would look back, so I can pull those that are coming behind me. So that's how it has--I hope that answered your question.

KW 05:58

Did while working at Freedom House, did it like help you like build connections that like, helped you like later on kind of like piece some stuff together?

GU 06:07

Yes. That powerful connection, one of them was Liberty Mutual. One day, Freedom House had an event here and I don't remember what was the purpose behind it. But I remember getting a call. I was a freshman in college. And they're like, "Oh, can you come? You know, we just want you to tell your story." Or something. I don't remember. And when I show up, I have no idea who the heck is in the room. I kid you not. I don't know who are these people, I promise you. I don't know what's Liberty Mutual. I don't know what's--I'm walking blindly, you know? And I was in the

midst of all the executives. I was with the CEO, the CIO, and all of the C's, you know. And in my table where I was sitting, it was the it was [Melanie Foley] and [James McLennan], which are the CEO and CIO at the time. And I remember towards the end of the event, Melanie was like, "did you know that we give internship opportunities for students' IQ?" And I was like, "really?" And she's like--she gave me her name tag. She's like, "get my email and send me your resume." I graduated college, and I worked there for two years. Like, what? That's what Freedom House is. It makes space for things that--for people like me, who--who never thought I would--I mean, look at me. You would judge me by a certain--you would have an opinion right now for how I look but it was not this. It was not this at all. So I'm very humbled and grateful.

KW 07:59

All right, when--So now I remember you were talking about how you had your original major, and then you switched kind of more into like the business aspect. How was that like transition?

GU 08:11

So I ended up not even switching. I did both. So why pick one when you can do both? I never, you know, again, we all--I always thought it was only one way. So when you get to college, you start realizing--and it's very overwhelming--that you have options, but you don't only have to do one. Like you can do anything and everything you do want to and that was a lot for me to register. I'm like, "really? I can do both? Am I even smart enough?" You know? "Am I capable enough?" And the way it happened: when I was in high school, 15 years old, I started my makeup business. So I've always been like this entrepreneur at heart and this business woman at heart. So when I got to college, I kind of knew I wanted to pursue a business degree. I wanted to learn more about accounting, finance, budgeting. I wanted to learn more about leadership development, organizational development, and all that. And then when I was, you know, walking and taking classes and trying out things, I took my first computer science course. And it was coming easier to me than anything else. I knew I didn't want to be a lawyer. I knew I didn't want to be a doctor. It's just not something I feel, I believe you have to be like, that needs to come out of your heart. And it wasn't for me. So I was super confused. I didn't know what to do. And then I took a computer science course and even though it was very difficult, it was just coming a little bit easier than the rest of the classes. And I met people like yourself, like coaches and mentors. And they started helping me and guiding me and they got to--one day when the classes got super hard and I went to the professor's office and I said, "can I have the drop out code? Because I, I can't continue computer science, this is too hard." Mind you, the only woman, the only woman of color, you would say in the classroom of 150 students, nobody knows you. You know what I'm saying? You feel so invisible. And the professor was like, "you're not dropping out." She saw herself in me for some reason. And she walked by my side. Throughout my four years in college. She helped me. She even assigned me tutors, private tutors. It was just so many things I--when you ask for help, or when you at least show up? You know, because I wasn't asking for help, I was asking for the way out. But you showing up, me showing up to that class, to that office, mate, it gave me the opportunity to at least have another way. And then I majored in both. That's how I happened. I did both. The business degree because I knew that's what I wanted to do. But then computer science, it just kept pushing and gravitating towards me. And that's something too that I have to say. Many times, I never knew what I wanted to be or do. But when I look back, what I am supposed to be and do comes to

me. It just pulls into me, like it just like gravitates—as a magnetic effect. And when I do my part, I can continue to rise. And the right people came. Just like this interview right now. I didn't know they were gonna reach out to me for this. But I'm here. And I'm showing up, right? Now saying no, not closing the door. Because I don't know what this is going to do or be for the future. When I'm gone. [Laughs.] Your voice is here with mine, Kevin, and Gisel, like, I believe it's greater than you and I. It's not about me being on this chair. So.

KW 12:03

Did Freedom House kinda like-- because I know with me it also kind of like, like—coming to Freedom House. Like, I remember we had--what was it called? It was called [Ever Source]. We had [Ever Source] thing. Nice. Yeah. And then that kind of like, inspired me and then kind of like opened my eyes to like, you know, just to keep that in mind. Well, because I'm doing electrical engineering.

GU 12:29

That's wonderful. Look at that. That's literally a copy--copy and paste of my story. Like you just be in the space. And then I was in the space where Liberty Mutual was and then look what happened, right? You were in this space with [Ever Source]. And you know, you want to be an electrical engineer. I hope you remember me what you make it--[laughs]. Congrats, that's amazing.

KW 12:54

So did like—did Freedom House like, kind of help like, mold--kinda like, your moral--kinda like your morals, but like, just like how you go about like, certain--Yeah, your mentality and like going about certain things?

GU 13:09

Freedom House did not only mold my mentality, but Freedom House made this space for me to be who I'm meant to be. So this space, the people in this space, they we refine me to be and think the way I do. It was always within me. And they helped me get it out of me. This person. So yes to that question. Freedom House has impacted and influenced me in every way. Professionally, personally, mentally, even spiritually, you know? Just me as a woman of faith and how important God is to me and my faith. Just knowing that I'm safe here to say I believe in God. That somebody is going to not judge me for that, you know? That somebody is going to accept me. So you're completely right, to that question. Freedom House has impacted me.

KW 14:14

Do you still have like, connection to your peers who are like, also here? Because I know you still know [Nick]. And so like, yeah.

GU 14:21

Absolutely. I still connect with, with the people here. I still connect and participate in as many programs that the students are involved in. I tried to show up and celebrate the summer graduations, you know, when the summer programs are happening. I came last year for their graduation even though I didn't get to meet them. I just tried to show up and celebrate them, that

they conquered such a milestone and--so yes, I'm still connected. Very much so, and I show up as many times as I can.

KW 15:02

Oh, yeah. Were you a part of like the [Push] program? Or like the [Reach]? [Project Reach]?

GU 15:09

I was I don't--you know, I don't remember it being called that when I was a student. So can you remind me? What's the [Push]? Because the [Push] is for college, right? Yeah. [Push]. Yeah. So I was absolutely, because that's how I got to college. And what was the other one?

KW 15:27

[Project Reach].

GW 15:28

The [Project Reach], and that one is for?

AM 15:29

It's the same thing. It's just, it was based off different generations. So it's basically the same thing. We're just asking whether or not you were a part of either/or?

GU 15:38

Yes, definitely the [Push], I--

AM 15:40

The [Push College]? Yeah.

GU 15:42

Yes, I definitely was a part of that.

AM 15:43

And if you remember anyone from [Push College], any other colleagues that might have attended with you, that you may still keep in touch with?

GU 15:51

I do not. It's so, so long ago, I do not. And I should get back to that [laughs].

KW 16:02

What were like the major issues that was like, kind of happening while you were, like, doing Project Reach?

GU 16:11

Yeah, like major issues in my life or in the community?

KW 16:19

Mmm.. well...

GU 16:18

Yeah, well, in the community? Man. I mean, when I was in high school, there was a lot of gang violence, a lot of housing insecurity, a lot of—a lot of poverty. A lot of you know, not being able to go outside and feel safe, take a walk. You needed to look over your shoulders. Not feeling safe in your own neighborhood, in your own community. And, and not only that. Also the division and gentrification that's still happening. That's worse now. But we were seeing that already when I was in high school, and a lot of that fear. “Are we gonna get kicked out?” And mind you, I was homeless, so definitely a part of that struggle. And one of the other major parts that I know was happening, it was the food insecurity. Freedom House literally fed me. Literally, I'm telling you Freedom House was there to give me a plate of food. Was there to give me some money if I needed, so I can not be homeless again after the pandemic happened and I didn't have a place to go back to. Like Freedom House was just there throughout the entire time. And in the community, it was just this unsafety. And there's violence and chaos. And just so much confusion. You can tell in the families, like my mother, for example, she was she was always so confused. She never knew what the next day was going to bring, and how she needed to pivot. And then for me—I mean, I think I'm answering both of your questions, personally and in the community-wise. But I think that's stuff that we're still tackling today, and the mental health awareness, too, I have to say--there is a lot of mental health issues in our community that we don't, that we don't pay attention to and more when I was in high school. So that was another one. Another big one.

KW 18:32

Do you still live like around the Boston community?

GU 18:37

So my mother still lives definitely in Dorchester. I--when I left for college, I lived in Waltham, which is where my university was, or is. Then after that I lived in New Hampshire. I've lived in Randolph, Massachusetts, I've lived in Watertown. I've lived in multiple different places ever since college. So my--I would love to come back. But definitely with the right--with the with the right, equipping. Like, if I'm coming back, I want to come back for a bigger purpose. And to make a change. But yes, my family is very much in the area.

KW 19:30

How did Freedom House-- because I remember you talked about how Freedom House like, helped you like mentally and spiritually. Could you like go more in depth about that?

GU 19:41

Yeah I'll start with the spiritual part. It was in 2019 when, you know, I kind of was faced with that, like, hit in my life of saying that there's something bigger than me. And recognizing the power of God and all of that. And I remember when I—personally, like it was a choice of mine that I said, I want to follow Jesus Christ. I want to become a Christian. I was very confused, right? I was lost and I didn't know how to, you know, embrace my faith and I didn't know about a lot of things. And in the pandemic, and in 2020, 2022, as I continue to grow in my spirituality. I consider to realize that a person like [Charmaine] is a believer, then I, our own CEO at the time, [Katrina Shaw], is a believer. And then you start realizing like, “oh, there is people that have been

walking this journey longer than I have, and that can pour into me.” And there was that one time, I kid you not, we were celebrating Christmas at Freedom House. And it was a Christmas event. And Katrina had the courage to go up--up front and say, “I want to sing a song.” And when she started singing, it was a gospel song. It was a--it was a Christian song. Can you believe that? Like, “I’m a CEO and I have--I can and I will sing and embrace my faith.” That really, that really impacted me to walk in my authentic self of like, claiming like, yes, I’m a faith woman. So that’s one way that I felt so safe and encouraged and have that role model. And then mentally, absolutely mentally, you know. Just pouring into me, pouring--as someone that needs to survive, or has had survived, you don’t --you’re always pouring out. You never get poured in. And Freedom House is just constantly pouring into me. And nurturing me. So that’s one way that they have shaped me mentally.

AM 22:33

We have everything?

KW 22:36

Yeah, basically.

AM 22:38

Because we have like eight minutes left. And this obviously, we can cut this off so doesn’t matter if we talk.

GU 22:45

This is gonna be, like, edited?

AM 22:47

Yeah, we could cut this off. So if you just say whatever, it’s fine. At least right now.

GU 22:50

I think the intro--like the beginning, maybe you can do it again. Like when “my name is Kevin blah blah blah.” I think--because now I feel you’re more comfortable talking. The beginning you were a little bit like—

AM 23:03

Shaky? Yeah

GU 23:04

Shaky. So if you want to do that--

KW 23:06

Alright.

AM 23:06

Wait, wait, wait.

AM 23:10

Alright, you got it, you got it.

KW 23:14

Hello, my name is Kevin. I'm a junior coach at Freedom House. I'm a student at Franklin Cummings Tech. Today is February 9th. I'm interviewing Gisel Urena for the Freedom House 75th Artifact Project using Audacity voice recorder located at Freedom House Boston, Massachusetts. Gisel Urena, please introduce yourself. Include your job title or anything else.

AM 23:49

I think that's it we're good.

GU 23:51

Yay.

AM 23:51

You didn't want to redo your part, or you think you're all set?

GU 23:54

I don't remember what I said so I think I won't—[laughs]—I'm trying to think if there's anything...

AM 24:03

I mean, you don't have any personal questions you want to ask? About like the electrical engineer, whatever.

GU 24:11

That was awesome.

KW 23:13

Yeah, I already—

GU 24:14

So--so are you--do you have connections with that resource now?

AM24:18

We're—

[audio ends here]