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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

A Taste of Houston

A Part of the Culinary Crossroads Project

UH Center for Public History

Interviewee: Cheryl M. Pradia

Interview Date: November 5, 2010

Place: 2411 Truxillo

Interviewer: Ezell Wilson

Transcriber: Ezell Wilson

Keywords: Raw Food, Third Ward, Vegan, Vegetarian, Raw Truth

Abstract:

This interview is with raw food proponent and former owner of the Raw Truth Vegetarian Café, Cheryl M. Pradia. The interview explores Ms. Pradia's introduction to the raw food movement, her tenure as owner of the Raw Truth Café and her perception of the significance of raw foods.

She was interviewed on November 5, 2010. The interview was conducted by Ezell Wilson on behalf of the Oral History of Houston Project, Center for Public History, University of Houston. The interview is available at M.D. Anderson Library on the main campus of the university.

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Ezell Wilson=EW

Cheryl Pradia=CP

EW: First of all, I'm asking you to state your name.

CP: Cheryl Pradia.

EW: Okay. And when and where were you born?

CP: I was born in Houston, Texas. June twenty-third, nineteen forty eight.

EW: Okay. I wanted to ask you, because this interview kinda surrounds your life in raw foods: what was your early relationship with food like, growing up?

CP: Well, my fraternal and maternal grandparents grew up in Louisiana—in south Louisiana, so my experience with food early on was Creole food,

EW: Um-hm.

CP: Gumbo, etouffe, crab, shrimp, you name it. But mainly seafood. We had soul food, but it was mainly seafood, and, so I would, um, I was always interested in food—in the flavors and all, so I would sit in the kitchen on a stool and watch my grandparents cook. And my mother was born in St. Martinsville, Louisiana and she is an excellent cook as well.

EW: So then, going from there and coming into more of the present, how did you begin your journey, or, how did you find out about raw food and the raw food movement?

CP: Well, I really started about twenty-five years ago reading a book called *Fit for Life*. I was on my way out of town for the Fourth of July weekend and I was in the airport and bought this book because it was talking about food combining and how meat just sits in your stomach for days before it's digested. And by the time I landed, I just said, 'no more meat for me.' I, you know, I knew I didn't want any more pork and, and beef, and I was never really a big pork and beef eater. I was really a seafood person and so I was picked up at the airport and invited to go to a steak restaurant. I said, 'no, I'm sorry, I can't eat meat anymore.' And so that next week when I got back home, I bought a juicer and I started juicing, and, the flavors of the live food were just awesome. And I burned up the juicer within the week. So I bought about five juicers before I decided to buy a commercial juicer. So I started on my interest in live foods with juices, just from reading that book. And one day I went into Ye Seekers, that is now Whole Foods on Bellaire and a lady named Olivia Franklin was in there and she was talking about raw foods, and I said, 'raw foods? You're talking about, you know, cucumbers and tomatoes and lettuce' and she said, 'well, it's more to it than that.' And she was demoing raw ice cream. And I'm like, 'raw ice cream?' She said, 'Yes, it's made with nuts and bananas and its non-dairy.' So I stood there, she made raw ice cream. I stood there for four hours, talking with her and eating the raw ice cream, and we

exchanged numbers. She grew up in New Orleans, a vegetarian all of her life and she decided to become raw; and I was interested in knowing more about it, but I said, 'Never, never will I give up my shrimp, my crawfish, my gumbo—I'll never do that.' And she said, 'Well, never say never.' So we exchanged numbers and then I kept calling her. She wouldn't call me back, so, in about two weeks later, she said, 'Are you serious?' And I said, 'Yes.' She was also a hair stylist and so I went to her house and she was making all of these raw dishes and everything was good—except the seaweed. I said, 'No, I would never eat hijiki,' and she said, 'I can't believe that.' So we would go to a restaurant called, well, it was called Rick's; it was inside of the Ye Seekers on Westview. And they had the most wonderful salad bar. And she would make her own dressing and bring it in there. And I said, 'Why are you bringing your own dressing to a restaurant?' And she said, 'Because I don't know what's in the food, so I'm bringing my own.' And she said, 'Do you want to be my friend?' And I said, 'Yes,' she said, 'Well don't question what I'm doing.' I said, 'Okay.' I was still ordering turkey burgers. And I just had not given up the poultry yet—or the seafood. And I kept speaking with her about it and she would call me: every week she made a different raw dish and she'd call me to taste it. Well, at the time, I was working full-time with Ninfa's, in the catering department. I was the event planner and catering director for Ninfa's and I had been there a very long time. And I started preparing foods there, learning the Mexican cuisine. So I always, from my Creole background of flavors, and then my great aunt worked for Italians in New Orleans and, so, she taught us how to make wonderful Italian food. So I had those two cultures and then the raw foods. So I was always tasting something and adding something to it, because I wanted different flavors. And so she would allow me to, and then she would say, 'Oh, that's good, that's good.' So we were collaborating on raw foods. And she said, 'I want you to meet someone,' so we went to Sunshine's and I met Sunshine. And I didn't know about Sunshine—this was in 1989. And I was telling him that I had a few problems with indigestion. So he read my eyes. And I thought Sunshine was a fortune teller [Laughs]. I had never heard of an iridologist and he told me all of the surgeries I'd had and I'm like, 'What?!"—and just by reading your eyes. You know, I thought that was so amazing and he said, 'Well, come to my meeting on Wednesday.' So I went to his health meeting and that's how I joined the community of more people eating raw. And, you know, I started going to all of his workshops every month, at SHAPE Community Center and got interested in it and then he wanted someone to take over his deli. Well, I met some ladies and they started working in the deli and they named it Sunshine Harvest. Well, I would go there for lunch. I would leave Ninfa's and go there for lunch everyday and I'd call in my order and when I got there it wasn't ready. So I started giving them pointers on organization and everything and Barbara Miller was one of the, uh, owners of the little Sunshine's Harvest. And she said, 'Why don't you come in and help us?' And I said, 'Well, I have too much to do and, you know, I don't know, that's not really what I want to do.' But something kept drawing me into the movement and their stay there at Sunshine Harvest wasn't very long, but we would go to SHAPE because Aubrey Pierre had a restaurant inside of SHAPE Community Center and we would go there for veggie burgers. And he left and the space became available. And Barbara Miller called me and she said, 'We want to open our own restaurant, we need your help,' and I said, 'I'm busy, I don't really want to do that.' She kept on and I said, 'Well, I will help you part time.' Well, that part time came into a full-time

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partner at SHAPE Community Center and we opened the Raw Truth Vegetarian and Vegan Café. So, that's how I got started into the movement.

EW: Okay. So it was located in SHAPE Community Center, which is right here in the middle of Third Ward. And then, a lot of your earlier experiences were with Sunshine. And so, you kinda had this raw experience here in the Black community. When, oftentimes, when people think of the raw foods community, they usually think perhaps young, Caucasian, that sort of thing—so what has been your experience in the raw food movement.

CP: Well, it may have started with Caucasians, but with someone like Sunshine that was, to me, way before his time with the movement, with Dick Gregory and a man named Aris LaTham, that taught Sunshine. They were into the movement a long time and brought it to the forefront of our Black community. So, even though I didn't know anything about raw food, it was still in existence, in so many areas and in the Caribbean as well. So, we—it's a blessing that we have him in our community to educate our people about it, and I feel that, with Raw Truth being in the community and providing the wonderful dishes that we had, expanded the knowledge. We had people coming from all over Houston, from Kingwood and the Woodlands, Caucasians, to eat at Raw Truth. And, we had put out posters and flyers in Optimal Health in Austin and, really, all over with the Vegetarian Society being, mainly Caucasian. They would have their monthly meetings at Raw Truth. So, we were a catalyst for the Black community, but expanding knowledge about what we had to offer to, you know, to everyone.

EW: So, then, by extension, did you see the Raw Truth as having a political or social kind of vision to it in addition to the eating of natural foods?

CP: Uh, yes, I think so. I think that it was a way of bringing, you know, people together for social, political, spiritual, just a roundabout, cohesive gathering of communities.

EW: Now, to bring it back a little bit, to your personal experience and—you mentioned earlier, your, your youthful experiences with food, when you began to get into raw foods, what was the response of your family and your close loved ones and friends now that you were making such a tremendous change—

CP: Right.

EW: --in your dietary habits?

CP: My, my mother was very sad. We would always have big dinners like the Soul Food that you see on television, on Sundays, and she was very sad that I was refusing to eat shrimp and okra, pork roast, you know, on Sundays. All of the really good foods that I enjoyed. And, my other family members—because, when I first started to do the detox and the wellness cleanse, I dropped about twenty-five pounds. So I had gone from maybe a size ten to size two. So my other family members thought I was in a cult [laughs], and they were really worried. They were, you know, talking among themselves and thought that maybe I had HIV or that I was just really sick. But you go through that transition when you're cleansing,

to cleanse the body of all of the toxins and then you're able to, you know, find your right weight and, and I felt so good and so healthy. The very first time I did the New Body cleanse, I mean, I really felt like I had a new body, I really did. I mean, it's, it's not one of the easiest cleanses to do with the olive oil and CKLS, but after being up all night, the next day I, well I had dropped five pounds overnight, but it was so—I was so—I had so much energy and so much mental clarity. And it was just an awesome feeling that I didn't want to go back to eating those things that caused me to feel sluggish and and gain all the weight. I was a Dr. Pepper addict, and being close to—my office being right near the restaurant, I was just back and forth, drinking Dr. Pepper. So most of the weight was sodium and I got rid of all of that and I was just—I always had a lot of energy, but with the cleanse, and with the live foods, I just—I was like an Energizer bunny, just always going and helping and just vibrant and lots of energy.

[Here there is a brief pause in the dialogue]

EW: Okay. So, then continuing with this thread of raw foods and for you personally, the realm of raw foods varies pretty widely from Paleo advocates who advocate eating raw meat in addition to fruits and vegetables and that sort of thing to people that do the natural hygiene approach and that sort of thing and in that respect and for for those that may view this video who don't know anything about the raw food movement at all, what does raw food mean to you?

CP: Raw foods mean live foods, foods that if you prepare it and you put heat to it, it's not over a hundred and fifteen degrees Fahrenheit. You know, you may be able to steam some things, but it is basically in the raw state. It is with all of the vitamins, enzymes and nutrients not removed by heat.

EW: Excellent. So [clears throat], what has, well you mentioned weight loss, have there been any other differences that being raw has made in your life?

CP: Ah, well, as far as energy, as far as health. You know, it causes me not to visit a doctor because food will, natural foods, raw foods, live foods will heal, basically, about any health issue that you have. So, I may go to [brief pause due to beeping sound in background] a doctor for a yearly checkup, just to see if my levels are up. You now, my vitamin D level or all of my levels, cholesterol and everything is in check. But as far as going to a doctor just to say, 'Oh, this is my doctor.' I don't claim an illness and I don't claim a doctor, and the—so this is what helped me with live foods—staying away from, um, paying my money to a physician to tell me what's wrong with my body, because you can listen. If I eat something wrong, then my body tells me right away. And wrong being—sometimes I may say I want, um, a piece of chocolate. And, if it's not raw chocolate, instantly I will get a headache. So I know that it has sugar in it and it has some dairy, and I don't use dairy at all.

EW: So, then have you—so, you have experienced a lot of positive benefits. Have you encountered, though, any—because raw foods is such a, sometimes seems to be such a small niche in terms of what people do in regards to diet. Have you encountered any negative feedback and, if so, how do you deal with that?

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CP: Well, the, the negativity that I have experienced has been in restaurants. When you go to eat in a traditional restaurant and you're asking about ingredients because, some people go in and they're allergic to fish or peanuts or something that will cause a violent allergic reaction. Well it's the same, same way with vegan, vegetarian: if this chemical or food has been out of your system, then it reacts the same way as something that you're allergic to. So if I go in and ask, you know, 'What's in the food?', then sometimes you get a very negative response from the waiter or, sometimes, the owner or the manager. And so that is sometimes a challenge.

EW: Then what was the experience like for you in running your own restaurant, that is, the Raw Truth Vegetarian Café? What was—would you tell me what that was like?

CP: Well, I, it was a great experience. It was a wonderful experience. We started out with three business partners and after four months, Barbara Miller left to go to California and it was Vivian Richardson and I and I was still employed full-time at Ninfa's so, therefore, I would go in the evenings and prepare the raw dishes for the next day and prepare some of the cooked items, such as the beans or the spaghetti sauce, whatever. And really, basically, Vivian ran the day to day operations, but I was mainly the behind the scenes person, because I had the experience of restaurant and catering. I guess the challenge there was not enough space, in that area that we had. And what was devastating for me was when Vivian died in 2006, and, that was a real shock to me because she was in remission for thirteen years. She had cancer and no one knew it. And that was a testimony within itself how raw foods helped her. You know, after she was diagnosed, and after she became vegan to benefit, and for her to have the same quality of life for thirteen years before she finally passed away. But she didn't share that—I didn't know, no one knew. And so that was really hard for me, after she passed, to continue with the restaurant.

EW: So then after transitioning from the Raw Truth Restaurant, did you stay involved in the raw food and health field?

CP: I did. After Raw Truth I did some personal workshops, going into homes teaching people how to detox and how to prepare raw foods. And Dr. Baxter Montgomery, who has Houston Cardiac Association and Hous—Houston Wellness, HCA Wellness approached me. He was one of our customers at Raw Truth. He's a cardiologist here in Houston and he approached me about joining his team to teach people. He started a wellness detox at his office. And so, for almost two years, I helped him get the program off the ground, and I was teaching people how to eat healthy and helping them with their four week detox program.

EW: Then, so then, I know that you've done so many events where you're teaching people how to prepare raw foods and you're getting people to look at their nutrition and health through the concept of raw foods and vegetarian meals. So how do you feel working in raw foods in such a realm where you're opening people's eyes to a new perspective on their diet?

CP: Well, it is really a blessing because I—you know, in the beginning I said that I would never become a vegetarian. And so, I just feel that God has moved me in this arena to share

the knowledge that has been given to help other people. Because I know that through raw foods, through live foods, that it is so much better, and I feel that it is a mission to, to share and to help people, especially African Americans, who are dying every day of diabetes and heart problems and hypertension. And, so I just feel that it is a blessing for me to share the knowledge that I have experienced and have been able to be blessed to have been taught.

EW: Well then, I'd like to also say that I noted on your resume that you won an award from PETA. Would you tell me what that was like?

CP: In 2005 we, at Raw Truth, we won the award for the Best Veggie Burger of North America by PETA, so I thought that was pretty awesome.

EW: So, then is there an ecological or, say, animal rights perspective to being raw or vegan?

CP: Well [laughs] you know, I may be vegan, but I haven't just adopted the total lifestyle that PETA would prefer me, because, you know, I, even though I buy some things organic as far as clothing, but I still purchase leather goods and so I'm sure there is, for the environment it would be better if everyone adopted that lifestyle—but it's also an expensive lifestyle as well.

EW: Then, outside of the home and the home kitchen, the world of food as people often see it—whether through cooking shows on TV or celebrity chefs, or even going to your local restaurant, oftentimes the world of food is sometimes seen as being the world of men. You know, you have all the famous male chefs. How have you experienced being in the food world as a woman?

CP: Well, men definitely dominate, but, lately, I have seen more and more female chefs you know, within the last ten or fifteen years. So, being able to network with them has, you know, has been a great experience. I have a certification from Alissa Cohen and she is a raw food chef. She had her own restaurant in Boston which is now closed, but she'd teach raw food certifications and I have a certification from her.

EW: Well, also relying upon your vast experience in food over the years, what is your opinion of the food culture here in Houston and—in the Third Ward in particular—and in Houston in general? What is your view of food culture here?

CP: Well, we are, in Houston, we have so many different cultures and food cultures as well and I feel that the culture—as far as raw foods—it's increasing here in Houston. And people are more knowledgeable about raw foods and I would really like to see more raw and live foods here in Houston. We're a little behind as far as organic and raw food restaurants. But, as far as culture, Houston has a vast culture of so many different ethnic cuisines here. And I don't know if I will open another live food restaurant, but I would love to see, or help someone to—my goal is to maybe have another live food restaurant organic with, you know, maybe in collaboration with someone else.

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EW: Is there a, you've covered everything that I've wanted to ask so well, so I'd just like to ask you if there's anything else that you would like to say or anything that you'd like to point out in moving towards the future?

CP: Well, I'd like to first thank you for, inviting me to, to interview with you today and I would like to say that if people in our community would maybe just take the time. If—they don't have to be vegetarian or vegan—but maybe just take maybe one day a week to fast, or to not eat meat, to just maybe go vegetarian for the day. Maybe take a Wednesday and just be in tune with your body and just start out by maybe just one day a week and just see how well you feel—just from eliminating something that may cause an illness. Because if you don't combine your foods properly, and if you are just staying with the SAD diet, which is the Standard American Diet, then you will not have the energy, you will not have the willpower in order to continue to live, because there's so many different things. It's not just food, it's stress of everyday life. It's the elements, you know, it's the air we breathe. So, if you would just take the time to maybe one day a week and just, maybe, fast and juice, or maybe just eat all fruit, then I think that you would enhance your life—enhance the quality of life while you're on this earth.

EW: Well, thank you very much.