

Laura's Story: How emotional connection in a safe space helped address her depression.

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Meet Laura from San Diego. Like many women of retirement age, she has experienced the joys of building a family and the challenges of staying healthy. Concerned about her weight and experiencing some depression, Laura chose to participate in a program called "Operation Change", conducted on this occasion in Spanish. In this podcast Laura helps us understand how participating in a health education program with a like-minded group, and speaking in their first language, can create meaningful emotional connections and lead to lasting change. With Dr. Rose Gonzalez.

Dr. Gonzalez: Hello, I'm Dr. Rose Gonzalez, a nurse member of the Executive Steering Committee of the Movement Is Life Caucus and your host. Movement Is Life is a multidisciplinary coalition seeking to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in muscle and joint health by promoting physical mobility to improve the quality of life. Today, I am joined by a participant from our Operation Change program held at the Kroc Center in San Diego, California. For those of you who may not be familiar with this program, Operation Change is a community-based, behavioral change program targeted at women who are African American, Hispanic/Latina or live in rural communities, who may be obese or experiencing joint pain due to limited mobility or experience other comorbid conditions. The Operation Change program includes structured physical activity and is focused on awareness and education to motivate sustained behavior change. Welcome, Laura, bienvenidos, Laura, como estas, how are you?

Laura: I'm really good. Thank you for inviting me to do this.

Dr. Gonzalez: You're welcome. It's so good to be with you today. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, Laura?

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Laura: I'm Latina and born and raised in California. My parents were farmworkers here up in northern California. Basically, went to high school, graduated, went to San Diego State. That's how I became familiar with San Diego, California. And worked a lot in the government with all kinds of different people, social services, department of corrections, district attorney, public defender, always helping others. That's always been my passion. I've been very fortunate to have been able to do that for 44 years. I have four children and two stepchildren that lived with me until they got married and two children with their father. The oldest is 50, the second one's 48, my daughter is 37 and my son is 30 on 10/31.

Dr. Gonzalez: You've been busy on a number of fronts. So, you've had a lot of work with the government and then, you know, I don't know how you balanced all of that.

Laura: It's hard. I'm sure all women can attest to that working fulltime and raising a family and doing that is a lot of work, but, also, very rewarding, as we all know too.

Dr. Gonzalez: That's true, that's so true. So, we're going to talk a little bit about Operation Change. How did you hear about Operation Change?

Laura: I actually heard it from my sister. She told me they were having this program and it was about nutrition and for women that were like overweight and things like that. So, I said, "Oh, when is it?" She said, "It's on a Saturday and it'll be for 18 weeks," and I'm like, "Hmm, Saturday, 18 weeks?" But I'm glad I went to the first class because since the first moment I walked in the doors there, I felt like I was at home. It's funny how there were so many different women there and they had us in groups, so we could communicate in our groups and do that, but it was very powerful because you

begin to build friendships and camaraderie with these other women because, as people come in and do the classes, we discuss things after and it's very powerful for you to be able to share what's going on with you and feel comfortable and learn from others and professionals the little things we can do that make huge changes in our life like moving, walking, things like that.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you heard from your sister. You heard from your sister and they talk, and she shared that it was going to be a lot about nutrition and maybe health and that was something that intrigued you. So, what, after you heard all that and I know you talked a little bit about you actually get there, but what actually made you say after you heard 18 weeks, Saturday morning, ay bendito. You know, what actually moved you to say, I'm going to join, I'm going to join and what about it really spoke to you?

Laura: I think for me was being around a lot of other women that were my age. I just felt like it was a great opportunity for me and it was a blessing because I was struggling with my weight and all that kind of stuff, and I've always been very active, but as you get older, you kind of like, you know, get a little lazy and lax. I just feel it came at the right time.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, the message came at the right time. You were ready to receive that message and you were intrigued and you said, okay, 18 weeks, but I'm going to take a risk. Right? So, have you ever done a program like Operation Change before?

Laura: Never, no I've never done a program like this.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, it was the first one and you were drawn because of nutrition, weight and then, also, you know, women, the women that were similar to you in age. Talk to me about

any changes you may have made in your life due to your participation in Operation Change.

Laura: Like I said, as you get older you can start slowing down, and I was getting lazy and I realized that what is going to change me is me. So, this class really helped me to stir inside of me, again, that fire that I've had all along. It reawakened me to remember how important I am and, as a woman, speaking for myself and I'm sure a lot of people that we always put ourselves last, and it's very important to remember that we also need to put ourselves first. And it's not being selfish. It's just loving yourself. A lot of times, in my life, I haven't done that and I think this reawakening to the power we have within ourselves that if we change, but just that little [inaudible 06:01] already changed and do little things that make a huge difference, which this class taught me.

Dr. Gonzalez: And you started to think about putting yourself first, which I agree with you.

Laura: Correct.

Dr. Gonzalez: I mean there are a lot of times that we, as women, we're the last one on the list. We're the last one on the to-do list. We're the ones that say, "Well, I have to do this, this, this but there's no time for me." So, good for you. So, how different did you feel after the program?

Laura: I felt a lot happier. I was struggling with depression and I was seeing a doctor and all that and I think I really believe that like I said this came at the right time because it's like everything fell into place for me. All the things that I needed to do for myself were helpful in this class, especially being around other women, hearing their stories and

being able to share yourself with other people, being in a safe place, not feeling judged about any kind of anything, especially, with me with depression like it's probably like you feel like there's something wrong with you and you don't want to talk about it. I think it's important to talk about these things because once you open up to other people, then other people start opening up also, and that's important because we, as women, we always put ourselves last and we don't want to talk about certain things from our heart because we have to be the strong ones, and we don't want to appear weak in front of anybody. So, we kind of like mask ourselves in our job with our friends, with family, even with our spouses. We just have to wear this mask that we're strong and we can take anything. Inside we have to remember that we have to do the things, walking or talking to a friend or having lunch or doing something. Taking care of our diet is really important and instrumental to our mental health and how we feel, and this class, like I said I can't reiterate how important it was for me and how lifechanging it was that it came at such a good time for me, when I was kind of like hitting rock bottom.

Dr. Gonzalez: First of all, I want to thank you for sharing about your depression. That's very brave because a lot of people, especially, in the Latino culture, do not talk about it. I think that's one part of the program that we really don't talk a lot about because we're not focused on that but that is one change that we see with people that, first of all, they weren't aware that they were depressed. Sometimes, they were aware and somehow the lectures and the social support that you get from the team really helps you to open up and really confront that and really start to work through it and start to feel better about yourself and there's nothing, you know, I think lots of people go through depression through their life and I think we do a disservice by not talking about it and it's very important for us women to kind of share that and say, "Hey, I was trying to take care of it, but this program also helped me and the sharing also helped me." So,

kudos to you, kudos to you, Laura, that was very brave. I'm going to talk a little bit about the program, the steps of the program. So, each session starts with a speaker. As you mentioned, you had speakers who focused on some aspect of health. Was there any one speaker or topic which was most impactful?

Laura: Gosh, there were so many and it's, right now, looking back, I wish I had my book in front of me, so I could look. It sounds very strange, but every single person that walked through that door to come in and speak to us is that message like, "Wow, I needed this. I didn't know I needed this." I think that was what was amazing about this program because every time you got excited to go. You looked forward to getting up early on Saturday and hanging out with these great people and learning all these new things, the exercise, all the things they did with us, it kind of got us into a routine, maybe not everybody but I feel like it instilled the importance of just the little time you've spent on yourself, doing whatever makes you happy, dancing, singing, whatever, it changes your whole day. If you start your day off like that and maybe you have a chance to end your day like that, I think it changes you in a good way because it gives you hope and it gives you happiness and joy, which we can all have it. You know, and for me, music has always been an important part of my life and when I've been through all the years going through certain things, when I turn on the radio or hear a song, it's like, oh, it changes me, you know. Those little things is what the class brought to us, along with all the dynamic people, the speakers that came, came with the right message at the right time and for me, that's what I can say, and I learned a lot, especially, from the other women that were there.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you are learning from speakers, right, who are coming in with their messages, and you are absorbing that and taking that in. You're learning how to be good to yourself, and take time for yourself in ways that you can take time for yourself and

you find that when you do that you're not taking away from other things, you're actually making yourself better. You're feeling better. You start to feel better and that feeling better leads to more making sure that you do take time for yourself. I know that we, in the program, spend a lot of time at the beginning in focusing on mental health. The first three or four segments, I think of the educational program were mental health. So, when you heard those speakers, did they resonate with you? Did they feel like they were talking to you directly or could you relate a lot to what they were saying?

Laura: Most definitely, like I say, I believe all of the people who came in and spoke to us, they were very powerful because I believe that every they talked about, for me, myself, hit a lot of places within me. So, I'm pretty sure it hit a lot of places within the other women because even though we think we're different, we're basically kind of like the same. Our culture, whatever, however, we were brought up or whatever we've gone through as women, I mean there's a lot of things that are reciprocal, you know, like the same kind of thing, and we don't talk about it because like I said it's always important, we're taught to be strong because we're like the head of the family and never really felt good about even talking to anybody about it, which was very hard. I think it's, I believe it's important because a lot of women have the same problem, as far as that's like a stigma like you can't say that you have depression because that's like you're lesser than or there's something wrong with you, and that's the farthest thing from the truth because it's basically, we all have feelings, we all have needs, and if sometimes those feelings or needs are not met, then, it creates a sadness or something and it affects our whole life. So, being in these classes and hearing from the people that came in was very powerful because whatever subject that was for that day it was like just speaking to me and I'm sure if they were speaking to me, they spoke to a lot of the other women in the room. It also opened

up the conversation for people to be able to feel free and talk about their situation. How they felt and what they might have went through, which is healing and very powerful.

Dr. Gonzalez: Yes, and I think one of the things that you sort of mentioned that it resonated with the other women in the group and you start to feel comfortable. What we see in Operation Change is actually that across the programs, across the country, people receive it almost the same way, even though, they're done in different parts of the country. So, we have a program in Chicago it's African American, St. Louis, African American, we had a rural program in Kentucky and you're, San Diego was our first Latina, all done completely in Spanish and very culturally competent. So, we made a point that people should be comfortable in that language and/or feel comfortable using that language, so that we can help them receive the messages in that language and feel more comfortable. So, do you think that doing the program in Spanish really kind of changed how it was received by the participants in your program?

Laura: I believe so because it's funny, I don't speak really well, Spanish. I understand it and I can communicate, but I feel that if I'm anywhere and I speak to someone in Spanish they're like, "Oh, hi," like it's welcoming. It's like oh, somebody that's like me or that hey. It's weird. I don't know how to explain it. It opens up a lot of doors for feeling comfortable with that person and like you have a camaraderie and there's like a connection like right off the bat and I think that what you did with this, having it all in Spanish, was very powerful and opened up, for a lot of women, for sure that maybe their first language or, if not, them to be able to express themselves even better because a lot of times it's hard to translate something in English because there's no match or words for certain feelings or emotions.

Dr. Gonzalez: There's something about, and I actually was born here but Puerto Rican heritage, and there's something about someone speaking to you in Spanish, it's exactly what you said. The walls come down. There is that culture connection and you're home. You're almost home and you're in a safe place is how I feel and it's inviting and comforting, at the same time. So, I'm trying to really understand your message about that because I think people fail to recognize that, that even though we may go in English and Spanish, you know there's a lot of times that I can't find the word in Spanish or I can't find the word in English to say and you move between the languages and that's very common for us Latinas, very, very common to do that. So, I'm sure some of that happened in those programs. So, I'm going to get back to what you were saying about the music because I, too, like music and find it changes mood and can get you, bring you to a different place. So, the second hour of the program was really about movement and we did a lot of different things. The team thought of many creative ideas to do that movement segment. So, why don't you talk to me a little bit about the movement and exercise segment that you participated in?

Laura: I looked forward to it because they would bring in like belly dancers or yoga people or the ladies that do the Latin exercise. I can't remember what that is called, right now.

Dr. Gonzalez: Zumba?

Laura: Zumba and it was just great because like people actually would jump up and start moving around. As soon as they turned on the music, they didn't know what we were going to do. They had an idea, but, not really, and they just started moving. So, music does change the energy. It changes how people feel and it's very uplifting and

it helps you just get in that happy space that you want to do something. You want to move.

Dr. Gonzalez: It seems like all the programs must have had a belly dancer because that's the first thing that comes up on the list when people talk about it. You know how you were saying, you know, we're very similar. All the programs may have had a belly dancer and that's the first thing, movement thing that comes up on the list is the belly dancer. People loved it. It pushed them out of their comfort zone and it also made them laugh about themselves because you're trying to move and gyrate and it's not something that you do on a regular basis.

Laura: You know what I find is that it was interesting looking at everybody, even thinking of myself and the belly dancing was really helpful because it kind of brings you back to your femininity and your sensuality and that you still have feelings.

Dr. Gonzalez: You've still got it. You're hot. You've still got it, still got it. I think that program that movement program, I think your team even went further because you were connected to the Kroc Center. So, my understanding is sometimes you did actually go into their center, which has a huge kind of gym and they have a pool, and I think one of the exercises, they allowed some individuals to go into the pool.

Laura: That's true. We were lucky because I didn't think about that, you're exactly right. The young people and the older people, the middle-aged people, younger than us, everybody would stop and look at what we're doing like, hey, they're doing belly dancing, and hey, they're doing swimming. So, I think it was also probably inspiring to some people to see that also like older people still exercise.

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Dr. Gonzalez: They're still alive. They can still move, check it out, check it out.

Laura: I would watch people watching us and I think they felt inspired because like, "Hey I never thought about belly dancing. If they can do it, I can do it." That kind of stuff.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you inspired others. You were looked at, you were stars. So, Operation Change – San Diego became stars at the Kroc Center, and then that left other people inspired. That's wonderful. That's really wonderful. That's kind of more benefits, just sharing the love kind of all around. That's incredible.

Laura: I want to say one thing more is that when you have this energy of happiness that creates a lot of love within yourself and it comes out to others, you're attractive, as far as them wanting to like, who are they? What are they doing? It builds interest and it also builds a lot of like faith in that you know it's good to see older people doing stuff.

Dr. Gonzalez: Right, right, yeah, we just don't fall of the cliff, right? As we get older, we shouldn't just fall of the cliff, but we're live human beings that can engage.

Laura: Correct.

Dr. Gonzalez: It eliminates those stereotypes people have about getting older and women. You know, we are still sensual beings and we still have a lot to give and we've still got a lot within us to give. So, the program helped to bring that out and also allowed others to see it in real life, right?

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Laura: I think also that people that were in the class that were married, I actually noticed that by the end of the class when they brought their spouses, their spouses were happy. Everybody was happy. Like the energy changes. If the matriarch, the person in the family is changing, it automatically going to send out, "Hey, what are you doing?" Like, what's going on? It's exciting.

Dr. Gonzalez: It sounds exciting because it's like a stone you throw in the water and it ripples. So, you finally do something for yourself and others notice in your family and they start to feel the change. That's wonderful.

Laura: I think if you talk to any of the groups that you've done in the past, they probably would agree that once you start changing your energy and you're getting more happy, it obviously attracts people, your family. Hey, like it's really important. I better stop, but my grandchildren, I'm with them right now, with their mom, and they're just like so excited because I dance with them, I play with them, you know, and they like it.

Dr. Gonzalez: They like it. They love you and they like it, and they want to engage with you and so that's great. That's great. And, Laura, that happened in other places, too. In Kentucky, I spoke to a couple of husbands that came to the graduation, they said the same thing. "My wife is changed. My wife is changed. She's happier, now. I'm so happy to see her happy. It's been great." So, it changes more than you. Right? It changes more than you.

Laura: It changes, in a good way.

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Dr. Gonzalez: In a good way. In a positive way. So, we're going to talk about the last leg of the program, which is really the support group that we have that we call motivational interviewing, but it's where everybody gets a team, you're assigned teams, and then, at the end of the dancing and the lecture, you separate into your little groups and you start to have discussions. So, talk to me about your work in these groups and teams.

Laura: Well, they would come and sit with us and ask us, what did we find that was really, powerful of that speaker? What did we relate to? Did we have anything we'd like to share about our experience during that class? That was really good to end the day like that because like I said, no matter what topic it was, even if it was something hard like depression, people actually would open up in the class but in your small group, it's more like you feel even more comfortable.

Dr. Gonzalez: Now, when you started to see the change and share your changes with the group, how did they react with you and what did they do?

Laura: Oh, sometimes things come up and you start crying and people, they'll start crying with you because, I think, it's relatable. Right? You don't do it to be, it just happens and once they see one person cry, it kind of opens up the door that hey, it's okay if I have these feelings and I want to speak about them. I'm going to let them out because this person inspired me to open up and just feel like I'm here with my family and it's okay and that's important. You can take classes and do all these things but if you're not given the space even to give yourself permission enough to open up, then, that you're really not doing the rest of the healing, which is important as letting go of that stuff.

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Dr. Gonzalez: I like the way you say the healing because you go in and you have these lectures and you discuss those lectures in a small group, but you also do the movement and pick up things that you can now share with your grandchildren and you feel better about and you're moving. When did you notice that the change was happening?

Laura: Looking back, now, I never thought about this, but I think it happened after the first class because I was excited go to the next Saturday because like, hey, what are they going to do now? It was nice seeing the women there because at first everybody's like a stranger and I'm very outgoing and I have no problem talking to people, I had to go up and hug them and say good morning and they're like, hey, and more people started doing that because they felt comfortable. You do what you feel in your heart and I've always been that person. So, I think it's not done for anything but because that's who I am but also I think it also freeze up other women to do the same and that's important because we all need to connect and we long for that and the class, like I said I can't say how much it meant to me and how it changed my life, especially, now, that I'm retired. I could have ended up not moving or being excited about life, but I'm actually excited about life.

Dr. Gonzalez: That's wonderful. What really struck me was what you said about the heart. You know other programs can give you exercises or lectures but this program also gives you the heart and the heart and soul and the community that shares some common experiences with you and it allows you to be. It allows you to be and share and open up. Which is not, you know, other programs you go, and you just do and then you leave, but this was, this became like a family, it sounds like.

Laura: For me, as a Latina, and I think a lot of people, I don't think it matters what culture, we all have passion for who we are or our family or how we were raised and all of it's

not good, but, for the most part, we do have passion for what we connect with. I know we all have differences but we're all very similar. We want to be respected and treated with respect and also to be loved and to be listened to. I think this class covered all of that and like you go to college classes it's like basically everybody is on their own and kind of like competing and that's not building, it's taking away from the experience. I feel like it's important to just be happy and be nice to people and talk to people and say good morning because those are things that people don't have that in their life and that's pretty sad.

Dr. Gonzalez: Right, right and like you said it came at a good time for you. You were just getting ready to retire.

Laura: The program for me was beneficial all the way around and the 18 weeks goes by really quick. At first, it's like 18 weeks, Saturdays, but, actually, I'm very glad I went because I looked forward to those Saturdays. There was always something new, something different, something great to learn or activity to do, the discussions and the camaraderie between the women was really, nice. I mean it was like you came everyday and you were hanging out with your family like a large family and everybody inspired everybody else and it was good to see during the class how people were changing. They were changing in a really, powerful, beautiful way.

Dr. Gonzalez: You know, we don't, here at Operation Change, we don't tell people what to do or who to invite to speak. The community decides that. The people who are in the program doing that are getting the feedback from you and the rest of your colleagues, participants in the program, to identify what's next? What do I need next for the program to keep it exciting? It really sounds like Operation Change came at a good time for you. You were getting ready to retire or you retired. You had been

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suffering from depression and were getting a little more sedentary and it kind of was right there in front of your eyes. It was just like an opportunity that you said, I'm going to try it, right, even though it was like 18 weeks on a Saturday morning, ay bendito, but you said, I'm going to give it a try.

Laura: On a Saturday.

Dr. Gonzalez: That's right and Saturdays are precious, Saturdays are very precious. So, once you started the program it seems like you to got respect, you got love. It helped to build your self-esteem and you ended up with a group of women who you stay connected with whose kind of like your little posse, your support team. Right? You've got friends and individuals who you can share things with, and you sound much happier and that you learned some tools. You got some tools to help you stay happy and take care of yourself. Most importantly, make yourself come first as many times.

Laura: And put that fire back inside of me.

Dr. Gonzalez: Put the fire, I like that. Put the fire back.

Laura: It sparked that fire inside of me. It ignited the fire inside of me again, the passion for living and that's huge.

Dr. Gonzalez: You know what? That's huge because life is hard.

Laura: The program was a total blessing.

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Dr. Gonzalez: I can see that the fire is ignited. I see the joy in your face. I see, I feel it. Even though we're on a Zoom call, I can feel it. I can feel your energy, your positive energy and I think, for you, you know, the sky is really the limit and I'm so happy you were part of Operation Change and maybe you would be part of Operation Change, once we bring it back, again, in the future because we hope to bring back Operation Change to the Kroc Center. So, maybe there's some way you can help the others on that team.

Laura: Definitely, I feel that Operation Change changed me in a beautiful way.

Dr. Gonzalez: The other thing people should know is that for the women who attend the program, their biggest cost I think is time and getting there. Right? Getting to the site.

Laura: Correct.

Dr. Gonzalez: Because the program is free and funded. So, we are so proud of Operation Change and we're so proud of the people who have led those programs and the participants who have just been, you know, you have opened yourselves up to change, which is hard enough to do. Right? Change is hard but you allow yourself and there's something that happens in that program and I will tell you, Laura, it happens, and it doesn't matter where we are. There's something that happens in that program with the groups that many of them have stayed connected. They stay as a support for each other. So, something magic happens at Operation Change and it's due to people like you who allow yourself to be yourself and to feel the change. So, I want to thank you for your work with Operation Change for being part of the program. So, I want to thank you, Laura, for sharing your journey and your story with us today and I want to thank our listeners for joining us for this edition of the health disparities

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podcast and we hope you find this edition enlightening and inspiring. I've been inspired by Laura and I'm grateful to Laura for sharing her story. So, from all of us at Movement Is Life and the Health Disparities Podcast, please stay safe, stay well and join us, again, soon and for more episodes, please visit MovementIsLifeCaucus.com. Thank you, Laura. Adios to our listeners until next time.

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