

Ana Flores interviewed by Bianca Rojas
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Brooklyn, NYC

Bianca Rojas: This is Bianca Rojas interviewing Ana Flores on July 10, 2019 in my living room. Ms. Flores are you comfortable with me donating this recording to an oral history archive being created at Guttman Community College?

Ana Flores: Yes

BR: If I show this to my class are you fine with it?

AF: Yes

BR: Throughout this interview I will be asking you questions about how your life was when you migrated from Puerto Rico to here and how you lived growing up here in Brooklyn. Are you ready?

AF: Yes

BR: Why did you leave your country of origin?

AF: My mother left with her kids, after she was in an abusive relationship.

BR: If you could name a couple of things from Puerto Rico that you miss or don't miss what would they be?

AF: I miss my family, my cousins, and my friends, what I don't miss was school.

BR: How was school out there?

AF: It was hard it was hard, very hard it was like being in jail.

BR: Did they beat you?

AF: No, but they hit us with the ruler.

BR: That's crazy, what did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving.

AF: My grandmother was brokenhearted, my uncles and aunts were sad and my cousins and people we grew up with were heart broken.

BR: How did you feel when you were told you were going to NY?

AF: we were all sad we were all crying, we were raised in Puerto Rico that was our family we didn't know what we were coming to.

BR: When you were on your way here what were some of your expectations of NYC.

AF: My mother was telling us that the buildings were big and there was snow. We were excited, Christmas would be different, snowy and cold. That calmed us down and let us give NY a chance.

BR: Did your journey to NY go according to plan?

AF: According to my mother we had our struggles. It was up and down but we made it.

BR: what do you mean up and down?

AF: Some days we would eat and some days we didn't, that was just how it was for us. We had to start all over again, we split up until my mother got herself up to take care of us.

BR: When you first came to NY what was your favorite thing to eat?

AF: Hamburgers and french fries.

BR: Oh interesting thought you would have said pizza but hamburgers are cool. Did you eat pork and beans?

AF: Yes we did

BR: Okay, you already answered this but how did New York meet or fail your expectations?

AF: It failed me when I was older.

BR: How did your expectations fail you?

AF: School not having the guidance from family and teachers they really didn't care enough to push us.

BR: Do you feel like if there were people around you in the educational system that could push you would...

AF: I would have finished school and gone to college.

BR: Do you feel that other kids were pushed by teachers? More than they would push other kids. Kind of like favoritism?

AF: Yes, there were some.

BR: How were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood specifically?

AF: We were coming to my Uncle and my Aunt's house, they gave us lots of love and bought us clothes. They put half of us in one house and the other half in another. They helped my mother find a job and apartment. They showed lots of love.

BR: What about people who weren't in your family? How did they treat you?

AF: The same way, they treated us with love and understanding made us feel a part of the family.

BR: So every person you met treated you with love?

AF: Yes

BR: Even strangers?

AF: No. In the neighborhood

BR: How did you adjust to the new language and culture, how did you adjust to the other races that you grew up with and their language?

AF: That's how I learned English, being around African Americans and white people, they were teaching us. They taught us a few words in English and we would teach them some words in Spanish.

BR: Did you grow up around a time where there was a lot of racism.

AF: No not me, but my brothers and sisters did.

BR: Because you're the youngest.

AF: Yea.

BR: Have you ever seen your brothers and sisters get affected by racism or heard about getting affected by racism.

AF: Yes

BR: Do you remember any stories?

AF: No, but I remember my brother was walking down the street with his girlfriend, she was African American and they chased them because he was Puerto Rican and she was Black. Two white guys.

BR: They chased them all the way back...?

AF: To the neighborhood. Because you couldn't go to a certain place, because it was a white neighborhood.

BR: Your older siblings, like they couldn't...

AF: They couldn't walk certain blocks, that it.

BR: What new opportunities were available or denied to you upon coming to New York?

AF: I don't remember, I honestly don't?

BR: Did you ever get denied a job later on in life?

AF: No

BR: Oh ok were there any opportunities denied to you because you were a migrant or Puerto Rican.

AF: No

BR: Oh ok, what did the assimilation project mean for you, assimilation means how was it for you to adapt to the new environment in NY.

AF: It was very different because the buildings were tall, in Puerto Rico you have houses you don't have. Now you do have tall buildings but at that time there were no big buildings like here. The first thing I saw was the clock, you know this is a big clock and you look up and it's like oh my god what is that. The languages, the trains we didn't have. Taxis we didn't have at that time. So it was different. I had to get used to all of it.

BR: How did you feel about the different seasons?

AF: Oh my god I remember the first cold I couldn't believe it. I cried, I wanted to go back to Puerto Rico.

BR: Why?

AF: Because it was so cold, I never felt cold in my life.

BR: But you don't like the heat either? Did you like to enjoy the spring and stuff?

AF: When it comes to the cold I'm talking about that freezing air I couldn't take, I don't like the winter, I like the spring, I don't like the fall and I like the summer. I love the snow, when we saw the snow we cried, we had never seen it before.

BR: When you were younger what was your favorite season?

AF: Christmas

BR: Season, that's a holiday.

AF: That's winter.

BR: You still don't like summer?

AF: I like the summer, just not the humidity.

BR: So now that you're older what's your favorite season, still winter?

AF: No Spring.

BR: I'm not a big fan of spring, my allergies are horrible, so adapting to NY was easy for you sorta?

AF: Well for me it was, I was young. For my brothers and sisters it wasn't that easy.

BR: Yea, they had to adjust

AF: They had to adjust to speaking english, how to write, how to dress, how to understand the different cultures.

BR: How long did it take you to learn how to write in English.

AF: A year or two. Once they put me in school I started learning. When we would get home we would teach each other. Practice with each other and help each other with homework.

BR: Where did you live in NYC and why?

AF: In bBooklyn near the waters. My mother, the first apartment she took was on fourth avenue and warren from there all the family went to saint marks. We all lived in Saint Marks like 5 families lived in Saint Marks, different buildings.

BR: Did you enjoy living on the same block as your family?

AF: Yes, I did.

BR: Even when you got older, like you know when you're a little older and start getting sneaky.

AF: No we lived on the same block

BR: What was the hardest part about coming to New York, about the move?

AF: I guess I was scared of the new/different scenery, and what's gonna be changed, what we would have to get used to, what it would be like and how we were gonna get treated.

BR: At first you were scared, overtime did it go away?

AF: Yes because I was the littlest one so it wasn't as hard as it was for my brothers and sisters, they had to go to third grade and fourth grade. It was hard for them not to know English.

BR: Over time your sacredness went away.

AF: Yea I got used to it. I made friends with new girls that knew how to speak English my age, we would exchange words. When I got to school I already knew how to speak English it wasn't perfect but I could defend myself.

BR: This question is not on the list but I want to know. Did you learn more growing up on your block then you did in school.

AF: In my block we saw everything.

BR: Yea I feel like that's what you're saying. How do you feel about that? How do you feel about you learning more on your block than school.

AF: I felt good, I was learning things that you needed to know to defend yourself, so I felt good I was learning in school but I felt good because I knew what was going on in the street, How to survive it.

BR: Yea I hear you, What was your favorite part about living in NY, growing up either in your 20's or 30's?

AF: Going to the clubs, playing hookie, you name it we had fun like a teenager did, it was so innocent like nothing was bad.

BR: Did you live your best life?

AF: I lived my best life in New York, yes I did.

BR: Did you ever get caught out being out too late past curfew or something.

AF: Yes of course I did.

BR: Who caught you, your grandmother or people on the block?

AF: My mother.

BR: Did she throw a slipper at you?

AF: No, she had a stick, I was already 21 that was not how I was raised, they had to get used to it. This was my time, my generation, my turn, and I was hardheaded.

BR: How did your presence help shape the neighborhood, like how did you and your family the Puerto Ricans help shape the block.

AF: Well it was family after family different generations but the same neighborhood, so everyone knew each other, things kept on going, everyone was getting along helping out, being there for each other. This is why I love Brooklyn and I love my neighborhood.

BR: How has your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

AF: Everything's changed they got new buildings a lot of people left a lot of people passed away, and they started making big buildings.

BR: Like gentrification?

AF: Yea

BR: How do you feel about gentrification?

AF: What is that?

BR: Basically, gentrification is what they did on third avenue like how they knocked down half the stuff.

AF: I don't, I don't like it. They are taking away a lot of memories that we had and we grew up on them and they are destroying all that just to make big buildings, high rises, big offices, what happens to the people, what happens to us. We are going to live in the street? Half of New York already does.

BR: How do you feel about that?

AF: I hate it. I live from check to check, and I pray to god give me the strength to go on?

BR: How do you feel about that? Like half of New York about to be in the streets.

AF: It's sad because a lot of us try to work too hard and they make it difficult for us. Raising rents, no low income, what happens to the rest of the people who don't have lights.

BR: Yes, when I think of gentrification I think of times back in the day when the wealthy/whites didn't want a certain race in neighborhoods. So they pushed them out.

AF: That's exactly what happening

BR: The thing is when they pushed them out, they either moved to a different borough country, or moved back to their country of origin.

AF: They don't want us here. They want everyone to go back to their own country.

BR: So do you think as neighborhoods change and gentrification goes on that people will go back to their own countries.

AF: People will go, what are they going to do here. They can't survive anymore, they are taking welfare. They are taking away medicare, they are taking everything away from people who are working, if they think we can live off of fifteen dollars an hour they are crazy.

BR: How has your perception of the neighborhood and united states changed over time, like your point of view and stuff.

AF: It changed a lot I'm sad I thought living in NY you would have freedom, the rights and the right to live as comfortably as you can. That you would have opportunities, but they are taking opportunities away from people. They are taking everything, they are trying to take us out. That's the sad part.

BR: So that how you think your perspective has changed over time.

AF: Yes

BR: Ok, we always talk about and you always see on the news the immigration system, ice deporting people, how they treat people, refugee camps. You see on facebook or online all the effects. So if you could do one thing to change the American immigration system what would you do.

AF: The first thing I would do is break those locks, those gates. Let those kids have freedom. There are kids that are dying. It seems like they don't care. A lot of innocent kids need to be with their parents, and most of these people that come from Mexico and other countries they work. They don't come here and sit down, they work more than most people. They earn their money and it's disgusting that some kids go through that.

BR: I have one final question, if you could go back to before you came and you had the option to stay in Puerto Rico or still come to NY what would you do?

AF: I would come to NY because it gave me an opportunity to learn, to survive, whatever was thrown at me I got up and kept walking. It wasn't perfect but I don't regret one day in NY. I hope to god that I don't have to leave NY.

BR: Ok thank you Ms. Flores for this interview.