

Nicole Trinidad interviewed by Armando Castillo
March 22nd, 2020
Bronx, NY

Armando Castillo: My name is Armando Castillo and I am interviewing Nicole Trinidad over the phone. I'm in my house, she's in her house, and today is March 22nd, 2020. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Nicole Trinidad: Yes.

AC: Okay, so we're going to start with some lighthearted questions that aren't too difficult and aren't too deep... With the first one being, where did you grow up?

NT: I grew up in Rio Piedras until I was six years old.

AC: Okay, and why did you leave your country of origin? Why did you leave Puerto Rico?

NT: My mom decided that living in Puerto Rico wouldn't provide me with the same opportunities in education that I would have if I would live in the United States, so we moved here.

AC: It was like the American dream. What do you miss most about your country of origin?

NT: I miss most that Puerto Rico has very friendly people and it feels like a loving community.

AC: Are there any stories that could back up that claim?

NT: Sort of like when my dad would walk me in the park and we would walk around, people just say hi to each other and like to check on each other to make sure if they're okay. Like when I went for vacation in December, we almost got into a car crash because there was a car that kind of like a broke a tire on the highway and my dad stopped the car and got out even though we didn't even get hit to check on the other people and they were fine. But that's just something that people in Puerto Rico would do that people here wouldn't do.

AC: Yeah, and is there anything you don't miss about Puerto Rico?

NT: I don't miss that Puerto Rico is kind of stagnant. When people feel like they've reached the point where they can make ends meet they don't push themselves a lot to continue getting more.

AC: Are there any reasons why you don't like that?

NT: I don't like that because I feel like if you can make ends meet, you can fight to have more than you already have, you can push yourself to have a surplus of the things that you need.

AC: When you first came to America, what were your or what was some of your expectations?

NT: I expected the typical American dream that every little child is told when they're moving to America. I expected to be embraced and for everyone to be different, but still accepted.

AC: And what was maybe your perspective of America before you came over here?

NT: I thought that it was like something so amazing where people of all different cultures all came together and all accepted each other.

AC: And did America end up living up to those expectations or falling short?

NT: It's unsure, just because everything is so black and white mostly like on the politics, different things in everybody's community. And I don't think everybody blends together like I thought they did.

AC: So when you actually did end up coming to New York, when did you come and who did you come with?

NT: I came when I was six years old. I came with my mother and my sister.

AC: You know around what time was it, like what year?

NT: I was born in 2001, so 2007.

AC: Okay, and when you did end up coming, how do you think you were received in your neighborhood specifically? So maybe you know at school or a playground, stuff like that being that you were a kid.

NT: Well when I got here, I was moving around a lot because we couldn't really find our footing here; like we took a couple of times moving for us to finally find our apartment we lived at, but the first couple of schools that I went to. I felt so uncomfortable because I did not know a lot of English. I knew how to say hi and I need help because my mom taught me that. She knew a little bit of English, but I did not know how to speak English fluently which made it really hard because I just didn't know who to talk to and they made it really uncomfortable for me.

AC: And in general in the United States how do you or how do you think you think you're received? Like let's see, maybe think general.

NT: I think I was seen as a little Spanish girl who didn't know she was doing because that's literally what I was.

AC: Okay, and so you spoke about how in Puerto Rico, everybody is so nice and you know caring toward each other and America, it's a lot different. How were you able to adjust to the culture in New York City?

NT: I think it took finding one friend. Like I found one other girl who was Spanish and knew English and knew Spanish, so she helped me feel more comfortable. And after I realized that there were a couple other people like me. I got more comfortable getting used to the environment, getting used to not everybody around me spoke Spanish and understood me and knew who I was.

AC: And so upon coming to New York City, what opportunities do you think were available to you? If there were any at all?

NT: Well, what opportunities were given to me?

AC: Well, what were available? Not given, but just able for you to have as an immigrant?

NT: At first, when I was little, I didn't really like know that there were opportunities for me available, but now that I'm in college, there's a lot of scholarships which are a real goal for Hispanic people, there's a lot of programs to help people find internships because they're in college and other people know how difficult it is for minorities specifically to find their footing.

AC: Well since you're older now looking back you know, were there or are there any opportunities you see that you got as a kid that maybe you didn't realize in the moment?

NT: I don't think so, I think as a kid was harder for I think because I was so little and because I didn't know the language and I felt uncomfortable at the very beginning I don't think there were opportunities provided for me, I think it was harder. But now that I'm older it's a lot easier for me to find things that are available to me

AC: So then when you were younger do you believe there were opportunities that were denied to you that maybe other kids got? It would have to do with the language barrier I'm guessing?

NT: Definitely, when I was with younger kids who knew English they were involved in activities that I was just denied from because I didn't know how to communicate like there would be field trips to the science Museum that I couldn't go on because I didn't know that I had to give a permission slip because I didn't speak English and I didn't feel comfortable asking other people what was required. Like it was just things that I couldn't really grasp because I didn't know.

AC: And because the teachers didn't really want to, you know take that extra step.

NT: Yeah well it was until when I was in like third grade that I had a Spanish teacher. She was the first one that really helped me a lot and knowing what was needed from me because I saw it was needed from other children, but I didn't know what was needed specifically for me because no teacher was communicating that to me directly.

AC: And how does or did that make you feel, you know, having to wait three or four years and fear your elementary school career that you were denied all these opportunities?

NT: I felt very secluded. I felt like nobody was really noticing me because every other kid that knew English was very involved and I felt very alone. And I still have that one friend but that one friend I don't know, had her environment already so she like she found her step already and I felt really like abandoned for it. But once I did meet my teacher, she really helped me a lot with my English, Ms. Vargas was the one that helped me with my English and I was able to really understand how to move forward.

AC: So in terms of moving, you know when you came to New York, what are some of the things that you kind of did at school to fit in with the rest of the kids, even though there was that language barrier which played a major role?

NT: I kind of, I think I dressed like them. In Puerto Rico a lot of people, like it's hot all year round, so when I started school, I didn't know I had to wear a jacket. Like my mom knew, so she would give it to me but as soon as I got to school I would take it off so, when I noticed that everybody is dressing and like wearing jeans and cute shoes with the goggles all over them because that's what I was doing school that's what I did, and it kind of helped me not fit in, but it helped me look like everyone else. And that made me a little more comfortable that I wasn't sticking out like a sore thumb.

AC: Yeah it made you feel more of a part of the community. So, where have you lived in New York City? Whether that be you know different boroughs or maybe just one borough and different areas within them.

NT: Alright, so when I first got here my mom took us to my Aunt's apartment in Brooklyn; Bushwick, Brooklyn, which she (Aunt) still lives there. She took us to live there because we were going to live there until we found our own apartment. So that was for like, I think it was for a couple of weeks. Not long because my mom isn't a person who likes to stay in other people's areas. So then we moved to a neighborhood in the Bronx. I don't remember because we stayed there for literally two weeks and then we finally found the apartment that we stayed at for like seven years in Prospect, in the Bronx. We lived there for a really long time and then the rent got way too high and it just wasn't something that was that we were able to stick with anymore. We needed to leave. It wasn't available for us anymore, it was too much rent and we didn't have the money for it. So we moved Edenwald in the Bronx, the projects because it was cheaper obviously and we needed some regular rent.

AC: And when you first had to move to New York City and then having to move here, which is a whole different country, then having to move around within the boroughs what was the hardest part about moving around?

NT: The hardest is probably having to switch schools constantly. When I was in Brooklyn for a couple of weeks, my mom always would put me in like a, not a daycare but kind of like a pre k thing and it was uncomfortable, but then I got used to it because it was a couple of weeks and then I had to move again. And then we got to Prospect and I was in the school for literally, I think it was like three weeks and I had to move again. And when I finally got to Prospect, I was also at a new school so I had to find a new group again. That was the hardest part, to keep continuously changing schools, being a little girl, and trying to find my footing every couple of months until we finally stayed at the apartment in Prospect.

AC: If you were to have stayed in Brooklyn or the first neighborhood in the Bronx, do you think it would've made school easier?

NT: I do because my Aunt knew a lot of other women in her neighborhood because she had been there for I think it was five years already. She had known other women who had kids, who went to the program that I was in, so it would've been easier, but I do like that I moved around because it gave me a sense of independence. It gave me a sense of understanding that when something's thrown at me, I have to make my best out of it and keep finding myself again.

AC: And living in New York, what's been your favorite part compared to Puerto Rico?

NT: Oh definitely the freedom. In Puerto Rico, everything is very far. You need a car for everything. You need a car to go to the store or the supermarket or something like that, like you need that kind of transportation. But here everything is available for you. You have the subway, you have the Metro north, everything is available for you to choose to go to where you want to be and that's really cool.

AC: Well, bouncing off of that, what's your least favorite part about living in New York compared to Puerto Rico?

NT: I don't think I have one. I love being here. It's different, it's completely different, but I love being here. When I go on vacation to Puerto Rico, I want to come back, like I don't want to stay there longer I want to come back to my home.

AC: So since Bushwick was the first neighborhood that you know you've lived in, even though it wasn't too long, since then how has that area changed?

NT: It's completely different. I went back recently and everything is different. They got gentrified so much. Things have changed, there's a lot of like white-owned restaurants and when I was growing up there it was mostly Hispanic-owned and Jewish-owned restaurants and stuff and now it's completely different. Now it's a lot of white-owned things and it made me a little concerned because if that keeps happening everywhere where minorities are. There's not going to be a place for us to go anymore.

AC: So, coming to America how has your perception of any neighborhood changed over time?

NT: How I'm perceived?

AC: Yeah, like how you're perceived or your family or your culture?

NT: I think, obviously when people look at me, I look Spanish, but now I don't think it's like oh my god, look at the Spanish girl. I think it's like oh, she's a Spanish girl because I don't stick out anymore. I speak English fluently, I still speak Spanish fluently, but I fit in. I dress like everyone just because I got used to it and I like it now and I wear my hair like everyone. I just look like most people except I'm still Spanish.

AC: So do you think maybe when you're younger you felt like you stuck out like a sore thumb because you didn't know much? And now that you're older you've been able to adapt?

NT: Yeah, I think the more time I stay there the more I, what's the word, I become like everyone, kind of. I'm still my own person, I still come from Puerto Rico, I'm still very Hispanic, but I'm more like Hispanic American because I live here and this is my community and what I call home

AC: So being that you're an immigrant, even though technically Puerto Rico is a part of America, what is one thing you would change about the United States immigration system?

NT: I would definitely change how immigrants are treated by the government.

AC: In what ways?

NT: In the way that like DOCA was something that was established, and legal, And now it's becoming harder for immigrants to continue to be in America safely. They're being persecuted and laws have been changed and it's just sad to see because those people came here. I know of many people who came through DOCA as kids and now they're teens, adults, young adults and now their like citizenship is in jeopardy and that's not fair because it's their home. It became where they grew up. They don't even know about where they originally came from anymore.

AC: Are there any candidates that adhere to this? That maybe you're keeping up with?

NT: Presidential candidates?

AC: Any presidential candidates that adhere to what you think should be changed in our immigration system?

NT: I have to say I'm one of the Gen-Z people who don't really keep up with politics. I don't really care but I know I should care because understanding I could have been an immigrant if Puerto Rico wasn't a commonwealth of the United States but I don't really care because sometimes I actually feel like my vote doesn't count. I still vote because I get a little educated

before I go to vote but I don't really care. I think Bernie Sanders is saying good things, but what he says will take time to come true which I don't know if he has that kind of time, but I don't know I don't really have a particular candidate that is like oooh I'm going to vote for him.

AC: And how has the politics of the last decade impacted your experience as an immigrant? So has maybe some changes you know made your life more difficult or easier or just not much has happened?

NT: I don't think politics really affect my life for the simple fact that Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States, meaning I was born a citizen, which I consider myself lucky for because if I came from P.R. like my mom did; she went through hell to get her citizenship when she was young and she had to go through the alien cards thing and then have to get her citizenship test, so I consider myself lucky that Puerto Rico is a commonwealth and whoever is born in Puerto Rico is immediately a citizen.

AC: Well that covers the questions that I wanted to ask. Thank you for taking part in this interview.

NT: You're welcome.