

Ramona Ramirez interviewed by Bryanna Gabriel
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Washington heights

My name is Bryanna Gabriel and I am interviewing Ramona Ramirez. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

RR: Yes.

BG: Where did you grow up?

RR: I was born in the Dominican Republic and I basically grew up there until I was 17 years old.

BG: Why did you leave your country of origin?

RR: My mom wanted a better life for her children. She made the decision to come to the United States. I came here about 2-3 times for vacation only. During my 3rd trip, I decided to stay here because of a better opportunity. Also, coming from a third world country and seeing a developing country. I told my mom that I knew she didn't want us living here but it would be great for us to stay here because of the opportunity.

BG: What do you miss about your country of origin?

RR: I miss my family, friends, and food. The country itself, the beaches and the rivers. It is the Caribbean and you know it's different. But most importantly, I miss my family.

BG: What don't you miss about your country of origin?

RR: Well, what I don't miss would be the criminals, the politics, and the lack of opportunities. In all means, education, social services.

BG: What did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving?

RR: In the beginning, my mom was really shocked. She said " no, no, no. You are not going to live in the United States especially in NYC. She said, " I am going to go over there and if you don't come back, we are going to have problems." I said mam "I made my decision and I'm going to stay." I promised that I will go to school. I was 17 at the time and she said " the only way I will let you stay is if you go to school." I made my promise and I kept it.

BG: What were your expectations of the United States?

RR: At the beginning of my first trip here, I was crying because I didn't want to be here. However, during my 3rd trip, I started learning more about the city and I was able to get

my way around. So, I started admiring the way it was. I liked the way I was able to get money by working hard. It is so different because if you think about DR, you don't find jobs as easy as it is here. I remember, my first job was at a Beauty Salon. The fact that you could go outside and get a job so easily was what really caught my attention.

BG: Tell me about your journey to New York entail? Did it go according to plan?

RR: When I came to New York for the 3rd time, I was not planning to stay. It was a regular 2-week trip. Therefore, my mom bought my flight and said "I'll see you in two weeks." After that, I made my decision to stay. Technically, it was a regular vacation trip.

BG: When and with whom did you come to New York City?

RR: The first time I came was with my mom and my brother. It was 1998 or 1999. I believe it was the Summer of 1999.

BG: How did New York City meet, and fail to meet your expectations?

RR: Like I said, the opportunity that I saw here was what made me stay here. Then, I start learning and seeing that made me want to live here. I start learning about discrimination and coming from a foreign country. But I think the American Dream is that you want to have a job, and a home. Being a Latina, and all these other things that come with it. It was definitely not easy.

BG: How were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood specifically, and the United States more generally?

RR: When I first came here, I went to my mom's brother's house. My uncle lives in the Bronx we stayed there for 1 week. Then we came to Washington Heights and it was 2 different worlds. In the Bronx, I saw things differently. In Washington Heights, I saw people from my hometown and in general from my country as well. To me, it was super shocking and I felt more comfortable and all the businesses were owned by people from my country. It was not a drastic impact.

BG: How did you adjust to a new language and/or culture in New York City?

RR: As I said, in Washington Heights there were a lot of people that speak Spanish. When I was working at the Beauty Salon, I had multiple jobs after that. I ended up working in a restaurant and there were people who could speak English. When I used to live in DR, I learned some basics from the English language. I wasn't very fluent but I knew the basic stuff. I decided that I would keep working and start going to school.

BG: How do you think being bilingual serves you?

RR: It helps me a lot because I am a bilingual person at my job. I work for FEMA (Region 2) and it covers certain states and countries. I have the opportunity to communicate in both languages. People come to me and say “ Ramona I need you to translate something for me or I need you to coordinate meetings.”

BG: What's your favorite part about living in New York?

RR: I guess it's the diversity. I live around a lot of Dominican people but I still see the diversity with the people around me. I learned from a lot of other people.

BG: How has your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

RR: I have lived here for 20 or 21 years and the way that things changed. In this building, there were mostly Dominicans living here. Today, there are people from all nationalities.

BG: How do you think the US immigration system can be improved?

RR:I think that society as a whole should take action and come together. People need to be more involved. We need to see how we can help undocumented immigrants.

BG: How has the politics of the last decade impacted your experience as an immigrant in the United States?

RR: First of all, I have a family that does not have legal documentation. Before and now it hasn't been easy for someone to receive any of these social needs.

BG: How does your family deal with a mixed-status household?

RR: You know like any other issue, we come together and try to deal with things the best way we can.

BG: Do you have any fear as an immigrant?

RR: I have the fear that one of my family members can get deported and arrested.

BG: Thank you for your time, Ramona. I appreciate you sharing your experience

.RR: You're welcome.