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Milagros

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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[PART 1]¹

Lauren Sepanski (L): I'm Lauren Sepanski and I am interviewing Milagros². Um, we know each other from St. Stephen's [United Methodist Church] ESL Classes, where we met, and she instructs and I attempt to assist [laughs]...to help her. Um, and right now we're at St. Stephen's, it is April 14, 2012. Um, and I'll just keep little notes in case something interesting comes up and I want to remember to bring it up later. Um, so I guess we'll start. Where and when were you born?

Milagros (M): I was born in Havana, Cuba.

L: Okay.

M: In 1950.

L: Okay. Oh, just like my mom. Well, not in Havana, but, excellent. Um, so, did you....You have one sibling, correct?

M: Yes, I do.

L: Is he, um...

M: He also lives in the United States, mhmm.

L: Okay. Is he older than you?

M: Older than me, he was born in 1948.

L: Okay. So how long did you live in Havana?

M: I lived in Havana for 20 years. I came to the United States in 1970.

L: Okay.

¹ This oral history interview was conducted in order to understand how migration affects racial self-identification. It is conducted in three parts. The first part was recorded before Milagros' piano lesson at St. Stephen's United Methodist Church in the Bronx at roughly 10:30am on April 14, 2012. The next part was recorded exactly one week later at the same time on April 21, 2012. The third part was recorded after ESL classes that same day, April 21, at 1:00pm.

² Milagros wished to be identified by her first name only.

M: So I lived in Havana for 20 years.

L: In the same house?

M: No, I...we lived in three different locations. Ya know, but I, in the city, but in three different locations.

L: Okay. What do you remember about Havana?

M: I remember everything. It was amazing that I went back in 2010. It was after 40 years. We were walking down-- my godson, who was, you know, who came to the United States much later-- and we were walking-- and he goes almost every year-- and we were walking down the streets and I was telling him, "And next is this street, and next is this building," and he looked at me and he says, "You remember" and I was totally and completely amazed how I remember absolutely everything, and that is, you know really what emotion is all about.

L: Mhmm.

M: Because I, I remember so many small details, that I couldn't believe...

L: Wow

M: ...the details that I remember.

L: You said your *garson*?

M: My godson.

L: Your *godson*. Okay.

M: Yeah, he lives in Florida.

L: Oh, okay.

M: And, uh, so then I went to—because he lives...now, his mom, that's where I stayed, his mom lives in right downtown Havana. And that's not where I lived, I lived on the outside. So we went to my old neighborhood, the last neighborhood where I lived in Cuba, and I went with his aunt.

We took the bus-- I told her I wanted to take the bus-- and We took the bus, and we got off the bus and I said to her, don't tell me, I just want to walk it. Don't, let me be ahead. And I just...yeah, again, everything...because...everything had, things have not changed much, so, ya know, everything, I remember it, and of course, you know, the tears, by the time I got to my block, I almost nearly fainted. Ya know, with all the emotions ya know that were going on. But I remember everything. It was amazing, I couldn't believe it.

L: So you lived in three different neighborhoods?

M: Let me see...[inaudible] yeah, like in, um, like in four different places.

L: Okay.

M: Yeah, four different...

L: Do you want to go through them and just...describe them for me? Were they all very similar?

Or, I'm thinking about demographic make-up. Were they like, um...

M: Oh yes. The last place that I lived was very different from the place where I was born and where my parents lived as young. My father was going through a—he has his own business—and he was going through (so my mother tells me, I was very little) and he was going through some bad economical issues so we moved to that place so it was not as pretty as where we had lived before.

L: Okay

M: Then my mom found a very excellent, excellent school for my brother and she decided to stay there, after the situation stabilized, she decided to stay there because of that school.

L: Okay.

M: And then it came 1959, and with the changes—not only '59—'60 and '61, all the big changes where you could not move, so then that's it, we were stuck there.

L: O-okay.

M: But it would not have been, had things remained the way they were, we would have only lived there like a couple of years. It was a very different culture. A very, very different culture from [pause] people and lifestyles. It was a specific difference, because that town--I don't want to say the name...

L: Okay.

M: ...Because then it would be identifying myself. That place, because it's like—how do you call here?—like, suburbs, you know, like a small place where everybody knows each other. And that particular place is famous for certain things...

L: Oh, like what?

M: ...that other parts of Havana are not famous for.

L: Okay

M: I cannot tell you that either.

L: Oh, why...

M: That would be giving it away! That's very interesting, but it will be giving away a lot of stuff.

L: Okay, um, well, in terms of, you said that neighborhood...you moved...your father was going through, like, economic trouble so when you moved there...

M: Oh, you know, when you move, you, um--what is the word?—

L: It was, like, a cheaper rent...

M: Ya know, how do Americans say, when you “downsize.”

L: Oh, okay.

M: So, we had to downsize.

L: Okay, um, so were there, was it like a middle class or a working class neighborhood?

M: Right, we went from middle class neighborhood to...

L: A working class...

M: A lower middle class, working class neighborhood.

L: Okay. And what were, what was the demographic make up? Were there lots of families with children?

M: Families with children. Families with children. It was a neighborhood with children. Yeah.

L: Okay, alright.

M: And black and white, ya know, Chinese-Americans, ya know, Chinese-Cubans, ya know, very mixed.

L: So it was very diverse?

M: Yeah, very diverse, that was very diverse.

L: Did everyone... was it a nice place to live? Did everyone get along?

M: Oh, absolutely! Absolutely. That's one of the things that I miss so much, when I came to live in the United States, because we were like, our neighbors were like our relatives...

L: No matter race, ethnicity...

M: No, because we lived in the same, let's say for example, everybody took care of the little kids. Whoever, ya know, this is so-and-so's son, you know all those little kids, if you see them doing something wrong, something happening, you know, you took care of those kids.

Regardless. Because they were the kids on your block.

L: Okay.

M: So they were like your kids, and with the older people it was the same thing. I mean, there was no question, if you saw an older person immediately you stand right by them and walk with

them, even if they could walk by themselves, but you walk with them. Ya know, just to make sure they were okay.

L: So...

M: So your neighborhoods were very, very strong. That's what, they were very, very strong.

L: So you were united by your neighborhood...

M: Yeah. That was like, forget it. We were very, very strong on that. And the people that we went to school with. Even now, I go to Miami, and I meet people that I knew since third or fourth grade, and we are like [clasps hands together tightly and shakes them] this, because, you know, that time means a lot to us. That time when we were kids, that's...it means a lot to us.

L: So that was like, your formative years....mostly.

M: And those were my formative years!

L: Right, because you were 20 years old by the time you moved. Um...can you describe to me, like, your school experience?

M: Oh, school was excellent! I used to tell people that's why I became a teacher.

L: Oh...

M: Because, you know, my, my school experience was excellent. Um, the teacher was really—first of all, it's not only, I don't think it's only the country, but it's also, remember, it was a different generation, you know, our teacher was really our mom. So, you know, you were liked there. I had only one brother and he went to school where he spent the whole day in the school, and he had a thousand activities and so on. So I only saw my brother at night and then on Saturdays and Sundays. So, my friends in school—I was like the only child—so my friends in school were like, forget it, they were like my sisters. So the school experience, we have band,

and that's what I like St. Stephen's so much, because we had band, and that's when I started taking piano, and...and this, and sports, you know, our life was school.

L: Right. I can identify with that [laughs].

M: Yeah, it was not only like, at 2:15 the bell rings and you go home and...no, no, no, we were really very involved...in the school and, you know...

L: Was that the school in the neighborhood where you moved to when you were nine and stayed there for the rest...

M: Yeah, right. No, no, no. Yeah, that's it, that's the neighborhood that I'm talking about.

L: Okay.

M: Because the other, I was too young.

L: Alright.

M: Ya know. So like...

L: So like the other neighborhoods...

M: The other neighborhoods, I don't really remember.

L: Okay

M: Ya know, in terms of what I did.

L: Mhmm

M: Because I was like a baby or a youngster, you know.

L: Right

M: This is the neighborhood that I remember, the last two neighborhoods.

L: Okay.

M: Oh, I have to tell you an anecdote!

L: Okay.

M: I was in Argentina. And my first day, we got there on Sunday, like about 10 or 11 o'clock.

And they told us to go to this park, I did, we did not even unpacked. It was like Central Park.

And they had all of these activities, it was really wonderful. And, uh, you know, they had music, theater, this and that, you know, just like Central Park, but in every corner there was a different activity and it was very interesting and then they were selling here and food and uh...so as I'm going through all of this, I was there like two or three hours already in the park, and every time you keep moving it was more interesting, and then I hear this Cuban music—REAL CUBAN MUSIC, like what they play *today*—and I said loud, 'WHERE ARE THE CUBANS HERE?' and this girl come out and said, [snaps her fingers] "Here I am!" And we hugged and embraced. She was from that town that I'm telling you about.

L: [gasps]

M: So when I told her she said, "Oh my God!" So she called the other people that she was with, "She is from my neighborhood!" and "do you remember so-and-so?" and I said no, look at your age. She was about your age.³ I said, "No, I don't remember these people that you are talking about, because the people that grew up with me, they all, we all lived in New York or Miami," So I knew that she was from the new generation. So that was, uh, a wonderful experience. And we hugged and we kissed because just by *mentioning the place*, and I mentioned a couple of places, that was it, that [claps hands together] we were bonded. We were from the same place.

L: Wow

M: And from that town I had another experience. This is, that town that I'm telling you about, when we first moved, we moved like, it was *all the way at the end*, ya know, that neighborhood, ya know how it is, the further you are, the less the rent...

³ 22 years old.

L: Right

M: And, that, and I heard the boys, which of course, the boys were the ones that went out always and the girls, we were sitting and, ya know, and that they would go to a Jewish cemetery. And I asked my mom, I was like seven or eight years old. “What is a Jewish cemetery?” so my mom said, “that cemetery is for people that are Jewish,” And I said, “Well who are Jewish people?” And she said, “Well they are not Catholic, they have a different religion.” And kids, at those times, that for me was explanation enough. Many years later, of course, I moved to New York City, I become a teacher, and most of my coworkers were Jewish, and, um, in the UFT Newspaper I see this very small ad asking people for money for the cemetery in such and such location. I said [slaps hand on table], “That’s my Jewish cemetery!”

L: Which newspaper is this?

M: The UFT Newspaper⁴

L: Where is that?

M: Ya know, they publish it, the UFT.

L: Okay.

M: So they used to publish it and get it in the school free. And ya know how they always have the advertisement, ya know, whatever. So I called one of my Jewish friends—I think she was the union rep—and I say to her, “Look at this! This is where I lived!” And so I told her the story and she said, “Oh, I’m gonna find out what’s going on with this.” So she came back, like, a week later and she told me, “Yes, this is the, a *famous* cemetery.” I said, “Get out!” She said, “Yes, because there are famous Rabbis buried there. And when all the Jewish people left, the cemetery

⁴ The United Federation of Teachers

had left, you know, had been unkept. So now, they're—whoever did some research found out—
and now they're trying to collect funds to fix it and this and this and that.”

L: Why did all the Jewish people leave?

M: Oh, in 1959, 1960, all the Americans left.

L: Okay.

M: You know. And, um, when the relations were broken and the, many of the Chinese left,
almost all of the Chinese left, you know, all of those left.

L: Okay.

M: So that was, I said, “That’s my Jewish cemetery!” I had no idea that it was a famous...you
know, they have famous Rabbis, you know. Because there were many Jewish people growing up.
I grew up with many Jewish people not knowing anything special about their religion. You
know, just...

L: Right.

M: You know. And now my third story...when we were in junior high school. That was already
after 1959. And in the school, and when, you know how when you go from elementary to junior
high school, which is another bunch of different people, and the first year, you are like [holds
hands up] ya know, and then, these other two girls and me, we bonded. Like this [clasps hands
together] we were like the three sisters, always together. One was Chinese-Cuban. Her mother
was black, her father was Chinese. So she had dark skin and all the other Chinese features and
hair. And she could not have any style with her hair because her hair was just down and here
[holds hands up to represent bangs] and that’s it.

L & M: [Both laugh]

M: Yeah. And there was another girl who looked also very different. A red-headed. But *totally* red.

L: Wow.

M: And pimples.

L: [Laughs] Oh...

M: And at different times of the month –which we found out later why—her pimples were *out*, and her hair was like this *out* [holds hands up around her head]

L&M: [Both laugh]

M: So we were the three friends! You know how different we looked.

L: Yeah

M: And now, every time I look back, we didn't think we were different, I mean, the others may think—but we, we got along great! We didn't think anything...And we were like this [clasps hands together] and then, the teachers, you know, you know how in junior high you have different teachers every 45 minutes or 50 minutes, the teachers would go, "Betty, Milagros!" [holds hands up and moves them apart]

L: [Laughs]

M: We had to...they would separate us! Because if we were together—forget it!--we were talking, talking and interrupting. And that, and we were the three [inaudible]... and years later I found out she left, she was Jewish, of Jewish parents. She was born in Cuba of Jewish parents. And my friend Betty, which I knew, because I had gone to her house and I met her father who was Chinese, and me! So you know, we were...you know, like the three musketeers! You know, looking very *different*, and yet feeling, you know, very good with each other.

L: So when you were in Cuba, you were just a Cuban, right? Or did you...

M: No, we did not use those...here all of these...

L: You didn't use racial identifiers...

M: No, because you looked the way you look and obviously then people know, you know what I mean? That's why, I think it's so crazy here! That you don't have to say it, when I look at you I know! [Laughs] So we never had to fill out any...ya know, people didn't have to say...

L: Census forms or...

M: No, we never had to fill out none of that. You were whatever you were!

L: So you were...black?

M: I was black. I was black!

L: But it didn't make any difference?

M: It didn't make any difference! I was black. Now, at certain levels of course, race is always an issue.

L: Right.

M: You know, but I think, and this is now my opinion, you may talk to other Cubans and feel different, I think that our issue was and is still—I was just talking to someone about Cuba today—money is the main issue. And our issues with the last names. That's why I said to you I don't want to say my last name. It's the last names.

L: Okay

M. You were from the *Gomez* family, you were from the *Lopez* family. You were, it's like, almost not like the caste system, but similar. So the last names are, and the family that you belong to, is the most important thing. It's how you got your job, it's how you got your promotions.

L: So it was like an aristocracy...or something?

M: That was more strong than race.

L: Okay.

M: Because there were certain black people that have very good jobs and good positions and it was all for their nephews and nieces and kids and...So it's, because you gave the last name and then once you gave your last name, and it was all about connections.

L: Mhmm. Now...

M: Which I think is...it's in every society, because I see it *here*. *It's who you know*.

L: So it didn't... were Spanish last names favored or was it just specific last names, no matter...

M: No, specific last names because they, they detailed the city, the family.

L: Okay

M: Now, in Havana, you feel it even less, because, see, Havana was a port city. In Havana there were people from immigrants, from Spain, from France, from Portugal, from China, from different islands that they found lifestyles in, you know, it was a port city it was a business, since the 1800s, so that attracted many different people and created a certain kind of economy. In the, in the countryside it was mostly the Spaniards and it was the, the farm. So that was it. You know that was totally different.

L: Okay.

M: And that was...because, it's economics. Economics is everything. You know, you have, it's like New York City, and it's a different style—people have told me—than other places in the South, because the economy and the things that people did, who stayed here, who didn't, is different. So that's what happened to us.

L: Okay.

M: That's what happened to us.

L: Why did you family move from Cuba to Brooklyn?

M: To New York? Oh, we hated the government. My parents, they did not like. Remember, it was a change in, a totally different change from democracy to Communism.

L: Mhmm

M: And, especially the beginning years were very, very difficult. You had to belong you know, you *had* to do certain things. So my parents were in disagreement, they didn't want to do that.

L: So you just moved?

M: So we applied....No, not *just*...

L: [Laughs]

M: It took us eight years to get here. It took my father 13 years and it took my brother, came back, came on 9 years after us. It was a very slow process.

L: Oohh, wow. Do you want to, can you describe that process? What...?

M: Well, 1959, '60, '61, Castro said we are a communist country, broke the relations with the United States, all the Russians went to Cuba, so on, that was the political part. And that brought all the changes with the schools. Everything—*everything*--was changed. [Grabs cup] You take this cup and you turn it upside town. Everything was changed, nothing was the same. All the laws, everything was different. And you either take it or leave it. Many people died. Many people were killed. Many people went to jail. Many people took the boats and left. And many people applied to come to the United States. We had an aunt that lived here for many years so she sent us the visas, you know, and all of that. And then came 1962, the October Crisis, we had the visas, we had the *money*, we had the airfare.

L: So you were 12 years old.

Interviewee: Milagros
Interviewer: Lauren Sepanski
Date: 14 April 2012

M: I was 12 years old. And we were just getting ready to go. And then the October crisis came in and everything broke down. So, we—forget about it—we had to stay. Then in 1965, September 1965, September 28th—and I remember because it was the famous day with the CDR--when Fidel spoke at the plaza and he said, “Whoever wants to leave, you can leave.” And so, the *next day*, my mother was at the embassy. Because we had all of the papers! But of course, everything had changed. My brother was already 17 years old. Boys after 15, they could not leave because of military age. Then if my brother was not going to go my father was going to...somebody had to stay with my brother, so my father stayed. And then under the *new* laws it was the, um, it was, uh, it was a group of people from here went in boats to pick up their relatives. That was the Camarioca. And then President Johnson had the Freedom Flights, where if you have papers before, to leave the island and you have your family here that will be responsible for you, then you could apply and go. So we applied. But then the laws had changed. My aunt was, and this is when we found out, that my aunt and my father were half-brothers—which we never used the term half-brothers—but they had different fathers.

L: Okay.

M: So they had different last names. And then my aunt could not...according to those laws...you know how immigration is.

L: Through family connections it wouldn't work?

M: For immigration, ya know, this doesn't work. If you don't have the same last name it doesn't work. So it took us, we had to go around. We found my, my, one of my brother's...my father's cousins had the same last name. But we did not know these people.

L: Oh.

M: Because my, he had left... my brother's [inaudible], my father was the youngest. And his father passed away when my father was ten years old, so there is a whole bunch of the family that he did not meet. Because he was raised in...by his mother, and his mother's family. So, you know, there are people that he knows of but never actually met, or only saw them once.

[Woman enters room, says, "It's 11:30."]

L: It's 11:30. Okay, so, we'll just stop here.

[PART 2]⁵

L: Okay, so this is the interview Part 2, April 21, we're at St. Stephen's, I'm Lauren Sepanski interviewing Milagros. Um, last time we stopped and you were just in the middle of describing your father's experience, um, immigrating to the US, he...your aunt was originally going to sponsor him and then you found out that they had two different last names so you found another distant cousin of his that he didn't know much about and so...if you can remember?

M: Okay, no, now I picture it. What happened was that in our country we go by two last names.

L: Okay

M: So then if you are a half-brother, still you have the same one name in common. Here, for the United States, in the United States I found that it's only one last name. And for immigration, especially.

[Milagros' cell phone rings, she answers it, speaks a while, hangs up]

M: So then especially for immigration purposes, and at that particular time when they were doing that it was a special program through, I told you, the Freedom Flights, through President Johnson, and you know, all of that. So the last names, everything had to be perfect. And that they would not accept things like that. So then we found out that my aunt could not, um-- what's the word?—could not sponsor us. And so then, through, you know, we have many other friends and other people but it had to be the last name. So, um, we found out about this, this, brother of my, my brother, brother or cousin of my brother—of my *father*. The same last name. So we wrote, he said, “Yeah, I know about you,” --because he was much older than my father--and that he had

⁵ Before beginning this session, Tina informed me that she had looked over the consent form more closely and had seen that it was about racial inequality. I told her no, not exactly: I wanted to know about how her travels, which had inevitably brought her to places with distinct racial and ethnic tensions, had affected how she saw herself. “Oh,” she told me. “That’s easy. I never experienced any of that. People have always been very nice to me. I am clear in who I am. If anybody doesn’t like it they don’t have to like me.” Her desire to stay true to this statement may have affected what she said in the interview.

come to the United States a long time, so he said, “No, I knew about you, I always wanted to know you, this and this and that.” Sure, so you know, it’s like this, you know, things on the TV that we see now. So I wrote to my cousin. She wrote me a beautiful letter--she was the same age as my brother--she wrote me a beautiful letter in Spanish and I said, “Oh great.” When I got here, she did not know that much Spanish. She *knew* some Spanish but not as good as the letter [laughs] you know.

L: Oh! [Laughs]

M: But she was good because she, you know, she practiced a lot with me. She said, “Great, I can practice.” Because she could read it and write it, the usual stuff, and knew some phrases, but to get into deep conversation she’d have to keep turning to her father, “How do I say this? I want to say this. How do I say this?” So like that. So it was, um, so that’s how we got to know him. He was a part of the family. Because like I told you before, in my father’s family there were many people that we did not know. Because his father died so young that he was raised by his mother’s side. So we got to know them, then we came to the United States.

L: What year was that?

M: 1970.

L: 1970.

M: 1970.

L: Your whole family got to move at the same time?

M: No, no, no. That’s only my mother and I. Because then my brother was of military age. They had put...no boys 18 to 28 could leave. And then my brother, who could not leave. You know, in 1962 it would have been the four of us. But then by 1970, it was my mom and I, then my brother and father stayed, because my brother could not leave. Then there was some other kind of

arrangement later, in 1974, and my father came. And then my brother came in 1979. So it was all in little pieces.

L: Okay, okay. So before we wrap up your Cuba time, um, I just have to—want to—ask a couple more questions. Um, you said your dad owned a store?

M: No, not a store. He had like a little, I see them here every day on 70th Street. He had one of these, you know when the people have the little store but you move it. How do you call it? One of those carts.

L: Okay.

M: So that's what my father had.

L: Okay. And what did your mom do for a living?

M: My mom was a, um, a—not dress making—embroidery.

L: Okay

M: She did beautiful work for, um, you know, this embroidery, you know, now it's not popular but at those times, you know...

L: Right

M: Everything in your house, you know, was embroidery. And the, when the kids were born, you know, all of the children's outfits were embroidery. So my mother worked on that.

L: Okay

M: So she had some fancy clients.

L: Nice. Did she, was she able to work at home then, or did she...

M: No, that's why she worked at home. That was what was the beauty of it.

L: Mhmm

M: Because you know in those times, also, most women tried to stay home with their kids. So this, she could do at home.

L: Okay

M: Mhmm

L: Alright. And I remember the story that you told of the three musketeers. You and your two friends in junior high.

M: Oh, yes! Yes! Yes, yes. My darling friends that I have not, I know they live in the United States but I was not able to find them.

L: How long were you friends with them? Because you left Cuba when you were 20.

M: Yeah, but this was in junior high school.

L: Okay

M: We were in junior high school so it was like three years

L: Okay

M: That we were, in, you know, in the school. And I, I got to go to their houses. But you know, it wasn't that much. You know only one of them I visited her more at home. But it was, you know, after we finished school then, you know, there were so many things that were changing. Because see, it was at that time in Cuba where everything was changing. Every year the school system and the schools and everything, it was constant change.

L: How did the schools change?

M: All the old books were thrown out. See, because Marxism and Leninism took over. So everything, books were thrown out, teachers would teach with a piece of paper because all curriculum was really, uh, none of, you know, they were trying so hard to erase everything.

Erase everything. The national holidays were changed, everything was changed. This is the part

that many people that did not live through they do not understand: how traumatic it is that everything that you know, like, let's say for Americans now, if they say to you, "No more 4th of July," not only the 4th of July, you know there are many things that are attached to that.

L: Mhmm.

M: You go here, you go there, you...there are many things attached to that particular day and that celebration.

L: Right. Your customs, family gatherings, everything you're used to is...

M: Everything is. So that's what happened to us. Everything was changed. Everything. It was very sad. And people in my age group suffered a lot because we were growing up to do this, and then--doom!--it's not done anymore. For example, the Sweet, here they celebrate the Sweet 16. In Cuba it was Los Quinces. The Fifteenth. And it was a very nice party, you had rehearsals and you know, you did this and, and I was, my brother was older than me and he was involved in all of that so I was like, waiting for my time. Well, when my time came, forget it. That was out! So [laughs sadly] you know, that did not exist anymore. But these things would drop from day to day, from month to month, from year to year! Those changes, you know, and a lot of the social things were changed tremendously. And then people leaving. You know, you'll have in a neighborhood *four* people left. This is your neighbor from across the street, the person that we loved. You know. When we left we heard, I wrote to one of my neighbors and she was telling, she told me the little girl across the street for five years old how she cried and called my mom's name. Because she liked my mother a lot, so she kept saying, "Where is Celia? Where is Celia? *Where is Celia?*" You know, she was five years old, she could not understand that one day to the next my mother disappeared. So, that's why...

L: You said your neighborhood was very close-knit. And everyone took care of everyone...

M: Exactly, we were, yeah!

L: So, I mean, with people leaving, how did that affect the tightness of the neighborhood?

M: I will tell you that to this day I am not good at saying good-byes. And, and not only saying, like, big good-byes. At the airports, I cry, I, you know, I, I, I know-- later I read something-- that I am totally traumatized with saying good-byes. When I go away on a trip I do not say good-bye. I can't. Saying good-bye is a very traumatizing thing to me. Because, um I mean, having to say good-bye to so many people, to your life, is, it was so horrible.

L: But, despite this you said that your childhood, at least, was pretty good...right? You had great friends...

M: No, my childhood was good.

L: Uh-huh

M: Up to 12 years old, we were leaving. We did not leave. And at that time, this is when a lot of people started leaving and things started to change. So it was really, 15, 16, 17 that were very tough years because none of the things that I was prepared for took place. So...that's, that's what... Then my brother went into military service and my mom used to, you know, cry every night, I mean, you know we went through all of this different, incredible changes. It was, it was too much...It was too much. It was too much. That's why, I don't know if you heard the news, many people could not understand how upset the Cuban community was when this guy said that he loved Fidel Castro.⁶

[Woman enters room, explains we could have held our interview someplace else.]

⁶ The Miami Marlins manager, Ozzie Guillen, told TIME Magazine in April 2012 that he admired Fidel Castro. This brought about protests from the Miami Cuban community and resulted in a five-game suspension for Guillen.

M: So as I was saying, this is why people could not understand when he said that he loved Fidel Castro, how upset the Cuban community was. Because, you know, our thing is not that we just immigrated and we moved here. It is the suffering and all the things that happened.

L: Right

M: And there were *tremendous* changes. The division of the family, because half the family would be pro-Castro, the other one against, and I mean, I don't even want to go there.

L: Okay

M: I, I, and it's too much. I don't want to go there. It was too much.

L: Okay

M: And it marked my, my, I was going to have a wonderful, you know, coming out of age, and my 16, 17 years old were going to be wonderful. And they were not.

L: Well, okay. Let's move on to when you come to New York, then. Let's move on to the US. Let's leave that...alone. I'm sorry for bringing up that...

M: No, it's okay.

L:...horrible memory

M: It's okay. We relive it all the time when we get together. [laughs]

L: Well okay. Okay, so, when you moved to New York, then, um, what, what was the biggest change for you?

M: Oh my God.

L: It was you and your mother, so obviously your family was split up then, but...

M: Well let me talk to you about the good part...

L: Okay

M: First. Which was, oh my God, it was independence. It was me and my mom. [slaps hand on table] Because, you know, with the traditional country, everything was about my father when we lived in Cuba. Over here it was *me and my mom!* [laughs and claps hands] So that part was *great*. We could do whatever we wanted. It was independence. So I tasted independence for the first time. And then I became the head of household, which is a little bit scary.

L: You were 20 years old, right? So you were finished with high school. Did you go straight to college?

M: I, I took a year. My, my, I have a wonderful friend up to now, that she helped me. And then, you know, because English was the very sad and heart-stopping thing. And then I started college the following year.

L: Okay. Did you start learning English when you moved to New York or did you...

M: No, I knew, we took it in school. So, but, you know again, it was written. You know. And then I remember I'd pick up the Daily News and I could not understand anything because it was full of, uh, abbreviations and idiomatic expressions.

L: Right! [laughs]

M: [laughs] What is this? So that's when I started reading the New York Times, that I could understand it because it was complete sentences!

L: Right [laughs]

M: So I knew written, you know, English. But then, so I went to school, you know, for adults. I took intensive courses. You know, and things like that, so I could get ready. And then of course still school was a challenge. But, the reading material, you know, I could do it. It was some of the professors I did not understand very well, you know, like that.

L: Okay. And you were in Brooklyn at this time.

M: Brooklyn. Yeah. I went to Brooklyn College.

L: And you told me that it was primarily Jewish neighborhood or...

M: Brooklyn College. No, I lived in, uh, I lived first in, it was, um mostly African American and Hispanic neighborhood.

L: Okay

M: Fort Greene

L: But in school, Brooklyn College was, this is when I learned about the Jewish holidays, and you know, all of that. Most of the students were Jewish. And the professors. You know, later on, I learned, as I learned more about the culture, that they call it, this is "CUNY Yeshiva University."

L: Oh [laughs]

M: You know, at that time, now it's changed. But at that time, that's the way it was. And, um, and then we moved to another neighborhood. You know, and we were a little bit better economically. And also my uncle, this one, he had like a little bodega. He had a bodega with some other guys. You know, they had a, you know, like three men and they were all the co-owners. And, um, so he lived in the neighborhood because that's where the business was but he was already retired when my cousin, his daughter, his youngest daughter, got married, then he moved to Puerto Rico, which is what he wanted to do.

L: Okay

M: So then after he moved to Puerto Rico we moved out of there. Because it wasn't a very safe neighborhood.

L: Okay. Did you move to Fort Greene initially because that's where your family was?

M: Right, that's where he was. You know, that's why we moved there. Because he worked there, he had the bodega there. Mhmm.

L: Did you know of any other Cubans that moved to Fort Greene?

M: In that, no, in that neighborhood, no. It was my uncle and I and it was, "Oh, you're Cuban!" and there were, no, it was his, uh, it was African Americans and Puerto Ricans.

L: Okay.

M: Mostly. And, uh, then we moved to another neighborhood, that's after he moved to PR, and, you know, the business was sold, and after everything changed. And then we moved to a neighborhood that were a lot of Cubans. You know, there were more, many more Cubans.

L: Okay, which neighborhood was that?

M: Park Slope.

L: Park Slope. Okay. Were they...did they come...

M: Yeah they were, [Crosstalk]. Many had come a couple of years before us and at the same time. You know, like that.

L: So there, was there a strong Cuban community then?

M: Yeah.

L: Cuban stores and restaurants and...

M: Yeah

L: ...it was great. That must have been a little good for you, huh?

M: No, that was like [sighs] [crosstalk]. We were able to breathe, you know. Yeah, my mother was playing dominos with her friends, and you know, we were more in to our...and then again, it was good we had that. Even though it wasn't as close as in Cuba, you know, but it was pretty

close. You know, you felt that, you know, the person across the street, if anything happened, you could call that person.

L: So then there was a difference between living in the neighborhood with mostly Puerto Ricans and African Americans? Being with Cubans was different?

M: Oh, yes, indeed! Yes, absolutely. And like I said, we... you know, we had the same, you know, um, kind of background and issues and problems: half the family's there and the other half is here, you know, we had the, this is also what makes it, because you have the same problems.

L: Right

M: You're dealing with the same issues. Whereas a person with a different group has other issues. You know, humans are humans and problems are problems, but, you know, there are certain issues that are the same. I don't know if you met here, the immigrant community, you know, sending, "Today I'm going to the store to send money to my aunt, and you know, this and this," because it's the same, we have the same issues. So that also brought us together.

L: So that was a good experience then.

M: That was excellent. That was excellent. That's why when we moved from Park Slope my mother was so upset. She did not want to move. Although, at that time it was the next wave with Cubans because that's when many of our friends and my mother's best friend and closest friend, they moved to Florida. That was the whole wave moving to Miami.

L: Okay.

M: [laughs]

L: So the first wave was New York and then Miami was next.

M: We did not move because we did not like Miami and I was already in school here and so on and so forth.⁷ But, um, but that was the other big wave of Cubans that lived in New York moved to Miami. Most of our best friends, again, we lost them [laughs] you know, to Miami.

L: Oh, oh no!

M: No, it is incredible. It is incredible. But by that time, I was like, a little bit more accustomed to change, and then my life then became exciting. My life was very exciting. My life then turned out to be what my mother told me that my life was going to be. Finally!

L: What was it?

M: I was driving...

L: Okay.

M: My car. We were going places. Going on vacation, going places. I was in school, I had friends, I was getting ready to start traveling. So things were coming, the way it was supposed to be [laughs].

L: Right. When you were in Brooklyn College with a large Jewish population did, were they ever confused, like, "Cuban, like, you're not Jewish?" Were they...

M: No, no, no. because what happened was that, um, I don't know, there wasn't that much, see, years ago there wasn't that much emphasis with the ethnic groups, whatever they... So we did not, some people asked me, a couple of the professors, and I would tell them, but also, remember, that at that time the, the Marxist and...it was still the times of the Soviet Union.

L: Right

M: And, so people were more aware of the political issue.

L: Okay

⁷ She later told me that they could not move to Miami because it had no public transportation.

M: Now younger people are not. You know, because now the United States is in wars with Iran, Afghanistan, it's the Middle East. But at that time it was the Soviet Union.

L: Right

M: It was Cuba. So you know...

L: So they were happy to see you?

M: Right. You know, and they would understand, I would not need to explain the way I have to explain to people now.

L: Okay

M: You know, but it was...

L: Why do you have to explain to people now?

M: Oh, because people now, they tell me that, "Oh, well Cuba is beautiful."

L: Ooh.

M: So they are talking about tourism and the beaches [laughs] which is true, but they don't know the political things and the, uh...

L: Right, okay.

M: But at that time I found that more Americans were—also, this is my opinion—more Americans knew about international issues. Now when I talk to Americans I go... I have this joke with my friends and I say, "I'm not a teacher anymore," I say, "I'm not going to get into the geography class." [both laugh] Because many people, it's amazing that they do not know. Regular people do not know anything. And I found that, I find that very strange because we grew up so much into politics and that was so much part of our life, you know, and international, you know, it was a very important part of our life.

L: Okay. So then, there was a lot of sympathy towards you as a Cuban? They didn't mix you up and say, "You're an African American," or "You're Puerto Rican"?

M: No, there was a lot of sympathy. [crosstalk] No. I think also, I looked differently. Because you know, I did not dress the same way, you know. So I guess, you know, with something also that would tell people right away, they could tell.

L: Right

M: There was a lot of sympathy. I am forever very, very thankful. I had so many people to help me. Otherwise I would not have been able to make it. I will never forget, a professor at Brooklyn College, a biology teacher, I did not do well in her class. That was the only class that I did not do well. I failed a test and she called me and, uh, you know, we were in a conference and she's talking to me and she says to me, "Wait a minute, how long have you been in the United States?" and I told her and she said, "Oh my God." Of course, you know, because I had a lot of problems with those multiple choice exams. Because I was not accustomed to multiple choice exams. That was totally new to me. And, this double negative in this question: "Which one is not..." I mean, those questions would really...so I, so she said, "Oh, I know. Now I understand." She says, "Let me see if I can give you something else." So she gave me some other kind of test and I still did not make an A in that class, but I got out with a D, which, you know, was my only D, I was very upset. And, uh, so I had, no, I had tremendous, lots of sympathy. I mean, people would help me. I would talk to people on the phone. I never forget one time, I called Con Ed, there was a problem. They sent me this bill for \$150. Now I made \$150 every two weeks, so \$150 is a lot of money for me. So I said, "Oh my gosh." So I call and I say to the operator—it wasn't like now where they say press 1 for Spanish, 2 for...no, you spoke to the operator—and I said, "Do you have anybody that speaks Spanish?" And she said "Why?" I said, "Because my language is

Spanish.” And she said, “I understand you. Keep talking!” So she had that patience and she spoke slowly and I was able to tell her what my problem was and sure enough she fixed it. It was some kind of error with the previous statement and you know, whatever. So I had, oh, no, I had tremendous, tremendous, tremendous help. Tremendous help. My mom, we had tremendous help. When we moved to Park Slope there was a Cuban community but all of the stores and everything, and there were Irish people and this and this and that. My mother used to go shopping in all of these stores and I said to her, “How do you communicate with them?” She said, “Oh, they understand me!” So, you know, we had a lot of support. I think the city was less divided than it is now, but that’s my opinion.

L: That sounds really nice.

M: [laughs] It was very nice. My, and I say, “Thank God.” My first five or six years, when I was getting to know the country, when I needed it! Because now if I meet a nasty person I know how to deal with that nasty person! [laughs] You know. But, um, but at the beginning, at the beginning when we were learning the city, and then, you know, after my, my, my cousin got married and my uncle moved to Puerto Rico, so you know. And, so, we had a lot of support from everybody. Everybody was very nice.

L: That’s good. Um, so you moved to Park Slope.

M: Park Slope.

L: You went to College in Brooklyn, but then once you graduated, you moved to the Bronx to teach?

M: Because there were no jobs for teachers. That was, the year when I graduated, I will never forget, because Bella Abzug, the politician that went to speak at our graduation...

L: What’s her name?

M: Bella Abzug.

L: Bella A...

M: Abzug I think it is.

L: How to do you spell the last name?

M: No, I don't remember the spelling. She was very popular because she was very, in a way she was like Pelosi, you know, with all the make-up and she wore those hats and very... you know.

L: Oh, okay. I'll look her up.

M: Right, and, uh, she says, "Don't worry, you're all going to find jobs!" And we were like, "Yeah, right." [both laugh] There were no jobs! So they had, the uh, they passed at that time in education, I forget the name of this, this new amendment, something about bilingual education. So then they were hiring bilingual teachers.

L: Nice! Nice!

M: And that way I got it. But it was, you know, the area where there were more, it was in the Bronx.

L: Mhmm.

M: That's where the opening was. So that's where I went.

L: Okay.

M: And that's another anecdote.

L: What did you know about the Bronx?

M: Nothing. Everybody told me it was the worst place. My boyfriend told me, "DO NOT GO." And my mother told me, "*You* go, because in Cuba the teachers from the city, when they graduated, they had to go to the countryside to work. That's the way it is. So you go to the Bronx, you'll be fine. And in two years you'll come out of the Bronx." So, but it was like,

because it was like at the time when the Bronx was really *Fort Apache*. All the burnings of the buildings, I mean.

L: That was in '70...

M: '76.

L: Okay.

M: And, I mean, you'll be in this school building and everything around you would be, have broken.

L: What neighborhood was your school?

M: The South Bronx.

L: The South Bronx.

M: It was the South Bronx.

L: What, just so I can map it...

M: 141st and Brook Avenue.

L: And *Brook*?

M: And Brook Avenue.

L: Okay. Did you live in the same neighborhood as your school?

M: No, I lived in Brooklyn.

L: Oh, you commuted.

M: Yeah, because then I moved later to the Bronx. When I found out that I was going to stay more than two years.

L: Right.

M: But, uh, it was very scary and then you would turn on the news and I will never forget, what my aunt, she would be, "Oh my *God*, Milagros is in the Bronx! Oh my God I pray for you every

day! Oh my God!” And I said to her, “Relax, it’s okay!” And, um, it was my first job. I was very excited. I liked my coworkers; I liked the kids, you know. And we all left together, so you know, we didn’t have to, you know.

L: Mhmm.

M: Yeah, nothing really happened to us, you know, inside the school.

L: So you all commuted together? Did you drive?

M: At first I drove, I drove. But you know, we left the building together.

L: Okay.

M: And then from the school, 141st Street, you go down and hit the highway.

L: Mhmm

M: You know, across the Willis Avenue Bridge and that’s it, you are in Manhattan. So, um, so then one day I think it was a holiday and I turned on the radio station, the Spanish radio station that my aunt listened to, and then I understood why she was crying and so worried about me. Because they would give this news: “Man was killed in the Bronx. Woman was found on the roof. Girl was found raped. This drunk, this drug addict...” Remember this was the time with the heroin addicts on the corners.

L: Right

M: It was very, you know, it was very scary.

L: So you didn’t realize it was really that bad until you heard the news.

M: [crosstalk] Because then you know it is in the news, how you turn on the news and then you say, “Oh my God!” You know. And, uh, so that was, so that was the next thing. So then I liked the job, I liked everything. There was a free program to get our Master’s.

L: Oh wow.

M: So then you know I said, “I’m staying in the Bronx.” So I told my mom, “We gotta move.”

Because every day that Brooklyn Bridge and that FDR Drive, it was a killing, I had to leave my house at 6:30 in the morning so I could fight the traffic, whatever. So I said, “We are moving.” My mom was *so upset*. Just totally and completely upset. That was the only time that, one of the few times we disagreed, big, about things. And I said to her, “If you were working in Brooklyn then you have some weight. But you don’t work. So I’m the one that works. So, I carry the weight. So it’s whatever I say.” So we moved to the Grand Concourse area.

L: What street? Cross street?

M: 174, 176. It was near a hospital. It was near Mount Eden. Near the hospital.

L: Okay.

M: With all the high-rise and the tall buildings and thousands of people and my mother said, “*What!*” I mean, you know, from Park Slope, she says, “See, I *knew* I wasn’t going to like the Bronx.”

L: Ooh

M: But it was a beautiful building, a beautiful apartment.

L; Oh, good.

M: I had never seen such a large apartment. All of my friends that came here said, my friends that lived in houses said, “You have more room!” We had two bathrooms, a kitchen separate from the dining room.”

L: Oh my goodness.

M: Because those buildings on Grand Concourse, that’s the way they are. They are very large buildings. And, uh, so that was it. But we lived there only a year. I said to my mom, “When I find out about places”—because one of the teachers in the school told me about this, she, this is

where she lives so she told me about this building—and then I said to her, “After I find out more about the Bronx then I will find a better place. And I did find a better place.

L: Oh, even better than that?

M: No, because it was a clean and brand new neighborhood. It was in Soundview.

L: That’s in the South Bronx too, right?

M: No, it’s passing the South Bronx.

L: Okay.

M: It’s like, close to the bridge.

L: Okay.

M: Close to the, um, the Whitestone bridge. I don’t know if you know the Bronx.

L: Yeah, I do. I thought Soundview was like a big rectangle, but this is like the top of Soundview then, right?

M: [signals with hands] This is the South Bronx, when you are on Bruckner Boulevard.

L: Mhmm

M: And then here is a shopping mall and a shopping center and down this way is Soundview, so it ends in the water.

L: Right

M: Mhmm. So that was, and at that time it was brand new.

L: Okay

M: That they were starting to build there. Low, there were no high rise and they were totally different from the way they are in the Bronx, in Grand Concourse and they are back-to-back. Here is a building with a space, a yard in it, so you are spaced out.

L: So what year is this? ’79?

M: '79. No, it was after my brother had come from Cuba, so it must have been '81 or '82.

L: And this was closer to the school that you were teaching in?

M: Well no, it was close. Well, I drove. So, you know, the Bronx is very small. So everything is 10 minutes, 15 minutes. But it was like, it was a nicer neighborhood. It was cleaner, pretty. You know, we lived in a building that had a swimming pool, garage, you know. So it was different.

L: Now, can we go back to describing the Grand Concourse? Because I read this book on the Bronx and, um, the author says that around the time you moved in, um, the Grand Concourse was going through some abandonment and disrepair, a lot of the Jewish population was leaving. What are your thoughts on that? Do you agree or do you have a different view of the Grand Concourse?

M: When I moved there were still Jewish people in the building.

L: Okay

M: And there were, there were, everybody in the building was working. You know, it was like more lower to middle class. You know, it was very nice. Everything was good. But it started deteriorating. And especially, our building wasn't, but around us it really, they had, unfortunately a lot of the welfare people which, you know, is a different population. People, um, basically it is a different population because you have the people that do not go to work so they party at night and sleep during the day. Which for somebody that works, it doesn't work that...so that, that's what happened. Yeah, I saw it. I saw how it went down. And everybody felt so bad because, like I told you, it was such beautiful buildings. Grand Concourse is such a beautiful boulevard. They have rebuilt it now, you know, but it never, you know. But uh, so I saw a little bit of that. I saw a little bit of that. But not knowing the Bronx well, remember that I only knew the South Bronx, so Grand Concourse was a step up from the South Bronx.

L: Right

M: So I told my mom, “No, we’re not going to the dangerous neighborhood.” [laughs] “We’re going to be okay. We’re going to be in a neighborhood but you’re not going to see addicts on the streets and things like that.” And when I lived there I never saw that. But it was just too crowded. There was never parking. It was just too crowded because it was buildings, buildings, buildings, buildings. It was too crowded. It’s too crowded.

L: Okay. But then in Soundview, you liked the neighborhood?

M: Oh yeah. No, I mean my mom lived there 23 years. And still, the neighborhood has not changed. I still have friends there. It has not changed.

L: How has it been living in the same place the whole time?

M: Yeah, my mom lived 22 years in the same--until she got sick and couldn’t live at home anymore—in the same building. In the same building. And then again we had the same neighbors. It was, that building was teachers and policemen. [both laugh] Yeah, most of the people that I knew there were teachers and policemen. And the kids, my nieces, went there to the pool, it was, you know, a yard. It was very, very nice.

L: Wow

M: And again, because this was a co-op building. And the other were, you know, houses. There were a lot of empty spaces. Now they have filled them up. This is near Stevenson High School.

L: Okay

M: I don’t know if you know it. It’s near Stevenson High School. They had, further down, two blocks down, a school that was for, um, for, one of those special schools for kids that are a year ahead in school. And then there was a boys and girls boys’ club further down at the end. So you know, it was that kind of thing. They had the tennis courts in the park so in the summer you saw

everybody working out and exercises and playing tennis, and you know, it's a completely different, you know, atmosphere and kind and thing.

L: Mhmm. Um, so, the school, which school did you initially teach at in the Bronx?

M: Um, PS 30.

L: PS 30.

M: That was at 141st and Brook Avenue, across from People's Park.

L: And then did you ever move schools?

M: Yes I did. I moved to, um, then I did my masters in, my second masters in teaching mathematics.

L: Second masters? What was your first masters on?

M: In, on bilingual education.

L: Okay

M: And then, this is when I moved to, um, junior high school, intermediate school. And, uh, that was on Jackson Avenue.

L: Okay

M: So a little bit further up but still the South Bronx. On Jackson and Westchester Avenue. But the school was excellent because it was a magnet school. Similar to what they call now a charter. But you know, DOE, you know, Department of—Board of Education, not DOE the way it's called now. And so, you have like selected students and, uh, oh, this is where I really learned to teach and, you know, because the dedication of the teachers and things that we did, and it was excellent. That was very good.

L: Nice. Um, and so you just taught there from when?

M: 19...must have been like 19...[long pause] the years escape me. But it must have been like '81...in the 80s, in the 80s. I cannot remember the dates already. In the 80s.

L: Okay that's fine.

M: In the 80s, mhmm.

L: And, um, in the same book that I was reading about the Bronx, she kind of describes it as Puerto Ricans and Blacks. And there's not much diversity that she gives to the Black population at all. She just kind of bunches it all together. And, um, she kind of describes it as a rivalry between Puerto Ricans and Blacks in, uh, for who can have the most representation and get the most aid. And I was wondering if you agreed with that, if you experienced that at all? Or if you have a completely different take on your experience there?

M: No, absolutely. Absolutely. She's giving the perfect take.

L: Okay

M: But now I'll explain to you why. There were others, and because I was a bilingual teacher I saw the kids from Ecuador, from Honduras, so I—from Mexico, they started to come from Mexico—so there were kids from different places, but the political representatives, the principals, the people at the district office, it was Puerto Ricans and Black. And they were always at each other.

L: Okay

M: And that was the one time where I felt, I felt it. Because I felt at a very personal level that my interest were the kids. I want nothing to do with you guys, because you're sitting in your offices fighting your fights, I am here for the kids. So, you know, when everybody takes the side and you don't take a side, you are hated by both sides.

L: Wow

M: So I felt a little bit of that.

L: So instead of being pressured to join the Puerto Ricans or join the Blacks, you were like...

M: I did not join any. I said I'm not going to get in this fight. This is not my fight. Because I felt that they were both wrong. I felt that they were not doing anything for the kids. So therefore I would not join. But yeah.

L: Did anyone ever confront you about not taking a side?

M: No, no, no. There wasn't any confrontation because like I told you, when I went to work at that school, that bilingual school, IS 184, we were pretty unique. The principal had a very good relationship with the Superintendent. She loved him. So that means that whatever he wanted, we got. So we were less, you know, we were in this paradise.

L: Right, relatively.

M: And we were less bothered by other people. But my friends who worked in other schools, they felt it more. We didn't feel it that much because we were covered by the fact that the Superintendent liked the teacher. The school had a chorus, a beautiful chorus, and band. And we were always, at that time--that's what I like about the Reverend so much, what he's trying to do with the kids--at that time there were many, like now after the test in probably May, kids will go to this school and this school and the other school representing and our kids were always *top*. So it was like always IS 184. So, because of that, you know, we were not, you know, pressured. And also, the principal—who was a very good administrator, I did not like him as a person, I thought he was a terrible person, human being, he was terrible—but—in my opinion—but he was a very good administrator. He was a great manager. And he had a totally multicultural, uh, staff.

L: Okay

M: There were Irish, Jewish. There were African Americans, less of the African Americans but there were African Americans in good positions, you know, there were less but in good positions, there were Puerto Ricans, *he* was Puerto Rican. He was Nuyorican. He was Nuyorican. And there were Cubans. There were five Cuban teachers which was unheard of in the same school, there were, there was a teacher from Honduras, there was this teacher of Japanese background. He was, that school was, you know, the staff was multicultural so we felt it less.

L: Okay. So that was really diverse.

M: That was very lucky for me because other schools were not. My girlfriend from Panama, she went through a lot because when these people that were Puerto Ricans, they found out that you were not, that you were Spanish-speaking but not Puerto Rican, they gave you the second look. And then they would watch and observe. If you did not, sort of, join them they felt that you wanted to join the others. You had not joined the others but, and then the others would look at you with distrust because you were Spanish-speaking and you were contacting the parents and so on and so forth.

L: The others being...

M: The others, uh, Jewish or African Americans.

L: Okay

M: Yeah because in the book she does not mention that there was a heavy Jewish at the district office.

L: Okay

M: There were still, you know, quite a few of the superintendents were Jewish and, you know, the um, the history of the Board of Education, it was just all Jewish teachers, Jewish and Irish.

But because of the political reasons, in the South Bronx, it was the, uh, politically it was the African Americans and the Puerto Ricans.

L: And in your neighborhood was it just as diverse as the school you taught at?

M: Yeah, because I always move when I look, since I look for that carefully.

L: Okay. That's smart.

M: Ya know. I always look for ya know, for that.

L: Were there other Cubans in your neighborhood?

M: Only a few, because at that time the big wave, most of my Cubans, the Cubans that moved to, um Miami. So there weren't that many Cubans but there were people of different color, different nationalities. Ya know, I always look for that.

L: Okay. So then you escaped being torn between—like your friend from Panama—how she was pressured to either join one group or the other, you were able to make your own way.

M: Because I just happened to be in a school that multicultural was the name of the game.

L: Okay

M: You know, I remember that I had—was it in that school? no it was in another school that I did it—but you know, everything was multicultural. I will talk to this. Oh in that school I had a map. I was a math teacher, but you know I, the kids were with my home room, and you know in home room we talk about everything else. So I had the map of the Americas and I had next to that one it said, "South of the Border," because that year we had kids from twelve different countries.

L: Wow. Where?

M: Costa Rica, Honduras, that's what I told you, that they say South Bronx Puerto Ricans, but it's not true. Now, since those other people do not vote, have been here illegal, that's why they don't count. But in the schools...

L: Can you tell me as much as you can about that diversity? Because we're really trying to get histories that aren't in the books.

M: Oh, let me tell you, let me tell you. I had, we had to present one day, we had to put on a show. You know, the teachers at the time, we always have to put on a show. [laughs] And we hated it because if you were not [inaudible] to that you did not know what to do. But I put on this, so I had gotten this new CD from a Cuban guy, jazz, a jazz player, and we used to play with [inaudible] and this and that, and it's very pretty, and he talks about all the different countries. And I said, "Oh, we can use that." So I did it, and I talked to my kids. They dressed in different outfits and this and this and that. Oh, when those kids put on that show, oh my God, everybody loved it and they had to do it over. Because it was like, you know, when you're walking around and you're holding your flag and [inaudible] because we had these kids from all the different countries.

L: Were the children representing their own country?

M: Their own country. Their own country.

L: Oh, wow.

M: Because I always, this is another personal thing to me, I always told them that your country is like your family. If you don't love your family, don't tell me you love other people. And it's the same thing and I used to say them there's nothing wrong with loving your country and loving the United States. I said I love my country very much and I love the United States. So, and, you know, I always used to tell them, be proud of who you are. And so on and so forth. So we

always, you know, we always did that. We always did that. But it was, um, and then at that time we started to have lots of Dominicans. Not that many. See, in the schools we would see them, but again, in the schools, they did not ask, they don't ask for the legal status. So you know, we have the kids. And, uh, we had the kids from the countryside and many kids crossed over the, you know, the Mexican border. They have told me stories. You know, all of this. So we have those kids in the school.

L: That's great.

M: But politically, and especially at those times, they did not show up.

L: They did not have representatives.

M: Because you know, the parents could not vote.

L: Right

M: So...

L: Okay

M: That's why I said, "I'm not gonna deal with you guys just sitting in your office. *I* am teaching these kids." And I have, this is my best story, since you are interviewing me—what? Oh, it's my piano lesson!

L: Oh no! [laughs] Your best story!

M: Okay! My best story is my, my, one of my, one of my favorite boys. I met him, I was in another school. He was, this was 6th grade. And, he, we did a, we were doing a timeline and I was showing them how to make a timeline, you put when you were born and you know they only have to put, like, ya know, nine or ten years so it was an easy timeline. And he made the timeline and he put "19-whatever, when"—what was his name? Uh, Freddy—"when Freddy met his mom." And then when I was looking I said, "What do you mean, 'When Freddy met his mom'?"

Interviewee: Milagros
Interviewer: Lauren Sepanski
Date: 21 April 2012

He said, "Yeah, because I was born and my mother left me with my grandma when I was a baby.

And then I saw my parents again when I was two years old. When I came, so that's when I met my parents." So that, so then I became very close to him, with his mom, and you know, the whole thing, and, um, many years later I'm watching Channel 5 and I see this tall, good-looking young man, and they were talking about these kids that were involved in this thing, international with the United Nations, they had just come from [inaudible] and I said, [slams hand down on table] "That's Jimmy!" That was my Jimmy! I contacted his mom and got his email.

L: Wow! He was at, he went to the UN?

M: He was involved with all of that and is a very bright kid! That's why I told these people, "I don't care what you do, my job is these kids because they are the new generation!"

L: Right. Okay, well thank you so much for your patience, Milagros.

M: Don't worry about it.

[PART 3]

L: So, we were on... [pause] I think we just finished talking about your experience as a teacher.

Um, for how long did you teach?

M: 31 years.

L: 31 years. Um, just at those two schools?

M: No, I taught at four different schools and my last five years was mentoring new teachers.

When, uh, it was changed into the Department of Education, when Mayor Bloomberg and he got all of these people from, um, people that were not teachers, from Ivy Colleges and like that, and they had not had educational courses.

L: Okay

M: So in my district we had the pilot program, the program that they had in California for teachers that are more than 20 years in the classroom that would mentor the new teachers. And we were not administrators, rating them or anything like that for who were the people that knew the system, knew the schools, and then we would observe, we would meet with them three periods in one, once a week. And then we would observe them teaching and we will go over whatever, you know, the school was saying to, etc. So we were like, like their mentors.

L: Right. I think I've seen advertisements for that, actually, for recent college graduates who would like to be a teacher in New York City.

M: Right. So, but that, this was a little different. Now, this was at a time when there was this scarcity of teachers was tremendous because teachers were retiring in large... The year I retired, 3,000 teachers retired that year. So teachers were retiring in large amounts. And the schools were missing out teachers so they would have too many new teachers at once and there weren't enough older teachers in the building to help them out. Because when I started teaching, you

know, I, I took educational courses before, but also there were many, I was like one and everybody else was an older teacher, so I had many people that I could go and observe them teaching, they could answer my questions, but these people were in situations, some of them, well, everybody was new, so, you know, the principal and the assistant principal were not enough. You know. So that's why they had that program. So the last five years this is what I did.

L: Okay.

M: So it was elementary school, for, I think three or four years. And then junior high school, intermediate school.

L: Okay

M: And then, um, mentoring.

L: Okay. And then, so that's, that was three schools?

M: Four schools.

L: Four schools. Okay.

M: Four schools. Yeah, because in intermediate I was in two different, no three different schools.

L: Okay. Oh, okay. That makes sense. Around the same place? Were they close to...

M: In the Bronx but it was different districts.

L: Okay

M: Because then I moved to Yonkers, and then the South Bronx, and traffic again was very bad.

So then I started working—it was like around this area, because it was closer to the Bronx, to Yonkers.

L: Okay

M: So that was District 10.

L: What, were there any major differences you noticed, um, as you were moving from district to district?

M: Well I, District 10 was a better district than District 7. It was better in terms of organization and the type of students. Also, the Bronx at that time had changed a little bit. When I started teaching, like I told you, I taught in these areas with all the fires and this and that and we would have a chunk of kids leaving the school building because their building was just burned down or they went someplace else or to a shelter, or we would get a whole bunch of kids, so, you know, it was very, you know, up and down. But then after things got stabilized and then in District 10, which did not go through those things, it was more like, and most the parents of most of my students were working people, you know, it was a little but different.

L: Okay

M: So they, there was more stability in these children's life.

L: Okay

M: So it was less of a crisis. Because when I taught in the, in that, it was crisis. It was really, you know, a lot of personal crisis.

L: You were telling me earlier how you noticed as a teacher, you can tell when there are immigrations going on. You said, like, a bunch of Albanians were in your class one year, and then a lot of Mexicans. Did you notice that throughout the years?

M: Yeah.

L: What, do you remember all the different countries?

M: Well, it was, in the, in the big groups were the people from Albania, because that was, you know, the whole international thing. And at that time I was in the school in an area where it was an Albanian population so we had a whole bunch of Albanian kids at one time. And then we also

had a bunch of Mexican kids at that time. In that particular school I didn't have them, but there was a group of kids from India and Bangladesh, I didn't have them because it, they came in kindergarten or first grade. I didn't have those kids; I had the eighth graders. So, it was, I guess with the immigration laws or when people move, you know, but we did notice. Because, you know, the kids, the parents put their kids in school.

L: Mhmm. When did you move to Yonkers? Do you remember the year?

M: [pause] It must have been '91 or '92.

L: Did your mom move with you?

M: No, she stayed in, you know, she stayed in Soundview. Mhmm.

L: Was that the first time you had moved away from your mom?

M: Yeah.

L: How was that?

M: Oh! My God, another traumatic, you know, my life is drama after drama.

L: [laughs sadly]

M: Extremely traumatic.

L: But you decided that it was worth the move to Yonkers?

M: Oh yeah, it was about time. It was about time for me to move.

L: Okay.

M: Mhmm

L: What was the difference between where you lived in Yonkers and where you had been living with you mom in Soundview?

M: [pause] I cannot tell, because I didn't spend that much time in the neighborhood. And for me, the neighborhood is not that...when I lived with my mom it was more important because I

needed to know what was going on. I paid more attention. It's like people that have children, that they do have to pay attention to every detail in the neighborhood. But if you're a single person, I get up in the morning got in my car and left. I did not come back, I only came there to sleep. So, and in the summers I went away, so I really did not, know, get to know the neighborhood as well as the other one. In the other one my nieces were little, they used the pool. You know, so we were more, I was more into my neighbors. Here I did not see the people that much. It was more multicultural. In that building, when I first moved in.

L: In Yonkers?

M: Yeah. And I was [pause] I'm laughing as I'm talking to you because I realizing all these things that I have gone through. This was a small co-op building. And the um, the um, president of the co-op was an older guy. He was a WASP. You know, we joked about that because he says to me, "You know what a WASP is?" I say, "I think I know." He was very friendly. And he had to have some brain surgery. There was a tumor in his brain and then he said, "I do not know how I'm going to come out of the surgery. So I, we need to, in the papers we need to have somebody to be temporary president." So they elected me. [laughs]

L: Wow

M: So I was elected the president of the co-op which was interesting, then I get, I got, that's when I, then I had to concentrate a little bit more on the building, and all the paperwork and all that was going on in the buildings and that managers, I learned a lot. And then the people would call me, if there was any problems they would call me and you know, things like that, so that was, that was like, he came out okay of the surgery but he needed to rest. So for the whole year I was the president.

L: Wow

M: And as soon as he was fine I said, “Bob, you take it!”

L: [laughs]

M: He was like in his late 60’s or 70’s so he was already retired. I say, “You take it! You have time. I don’t have time for this.” But it was a good experience. It was a very good experience.

L: Um, when you said it was more multicultural, what does that mean?

M: Oh my God, in that building, there was a man from, from Iran that I had a confrontation with because something had happened—it was before the wars, it was before 2-11, 2000⁸, it was before that—but there was some kind of problem and he parked his car in some bad position. Parking was an issue and we did not have parking space and you didn’t, there was space next to the building but it involved a lot of money, making the parking lot money that we did not have, so on and so forth. So when I came out and I said, I saw and I said, “Is this your car?” So he turned to me and, this is like a quarter to 8, it was late already, and he says to me, “*Yes, I parked the car like that because I am protesting what the Americans did and this and this and this and that!*” So he gave me all of that and I had not looked at the news yet so I said to him, “Sir, I am sorry, but I gotta get to work, can you move your car?” So he moved his car and I went so and I got to work and when I had my break and it was so funny, I put on the TV and let me find out what is going on in the news with Iran because my neighbor is very upset with me! So we have people from Iran, we have people from Guyana, Indians that, they have, you know how they relocate to Guyana and they live in Guyana and they come to the United States. There was a lady who I had a big confrontation with her, she was from Colombia. And, um...

L: Why did you have a confrontation with her?

M: Because she had not paid for more than a year and we have to evict her. And it was at the

⁸ Referring to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

time when I was president. I had gotten a little bit friendly with her before that, she had three daughters and the youngest one was very cute, you know, I like kids so I used to talk to them. And they had done all kinds of things and she had not come up with the money. So then that day they called me from the manager's office and, "No, we have everything ready with the sheriff, all the papers ready, we are going to evict her. So you have to sign." I was the president and I said, "What does this exactly mean?" And they said, "No, the sheriff is coming, close the door and she cannot come in." I said, "She had three children." They told me, "I know but..." And I said, "No, I'm sorry, if you guys want to evict her it's okay but I am not going to put my signature on this because I will not be able to sleep, you know, knowing this."

L: Right

M: And I knew, I looked at all the papers, the woman kept lying and kept saying this and I had seen her apartment because she had invited me to her apartment. Her apartment was gorgeous and excellent furniture and everything! She just refused to pay! But I said, "I can't put my signature on something like this," because I kept thinking about the little girl and I said, "No, I can't put the signature on this." So anyway, we reached some kind of agreement, she paid something, you know, she owed thousands of dollars, and she paid something. And she fell behind the following month and you know, like that. And I'm looking out, it's a Saturday afternoon, I'm looking out from the window, I face the front, and I see this Rolls Royce, and I say, "What is this Rolls Royce doing in my neighborhood?" So I said, "Let me stay and see." Guess who was, uh, the Rolls Royce was for?

L: That was her?

M: Her daughter's. Her oldest daughter's fifteenth birthday. And they picking her up, you know.

I said, [claps hands] 'The nerve of that woman! They could have picked her up someplace else! To park there!' And I said, [claps hands] "Get me out those papers I'm ready to sign." [laughs]

L: Ooh! [laughs] Now was that just a rented car for the party, was it or was that...

M: No, no it was a rented car for the party. But *still*. You know, we would not have known that she was having this party or anything like that but she parked the car right there. They came downstairs, you know, the whole thing. So that was that. So, but that building, there were, there was that guy, there was a guy from Puerto Rico, his sister was one of those people that disappeared in the World Trade Center and was never found, her body. So I will never forget him, he was such a nice man. And, um, and there, again, we got along very well. I remember that there was, he would help me out, clean out the snow because in Yonkers there's a little bit more snow than in the city. And uh, he would help me out, you know, clean my car, and everybody was very helpful and friendly.

L: And that's where you've lived up til now?

M: No, I lived there for three or four years because *then* the neighborhood changed, very suddenly. And this was like, lower middle class neighborhood. But then it changed. And what happened was that, I guess it was one of the apartments that was also a co-op apartment, it was on the corner. They had the law that we also had, that we could not rent, we could see the apartment but not, uh, what is the word, um, sublet.

L: Okay

M: The apartment on the corner did allow the people to sublet and then all kinds of people, you know, there were parties at night, it was going on, and then one day my neighbor downstairs told me, she was from Jamaica, that, no, her brother was staying there, and her brother looked like a

little bit of a troublemaker, and then somebody else in the building told me, “Yeah, they’re selling drugs in your building.” I said, “What?” He said, “Yeah, the guy right below you!” –her brother. And I said, “No, I’m out of here.” Because, you know, I live alone, I cannot, you know, live in a dangerous building. So I moved out of there and moved to another part of Yonkers.

L: Okay, and that’s where you live today?

M: No. Then my mom got sick. Yeah, my mom, you know, she had a heart attack and we had to live together.

L: Okay

M: And, uh, so that’s when I bought the house. I live in a house now, in the Bronx.

L: In, back in Soundview?

M: No, no, not in Soundview. It’s in the East Bronx.

L: Okay. Um. Can you tell me what, near what major thoroughfare so I can get an idea?

M: Near the Bronx River Parkway.

L: Okay. Do you like that area?

M: I do. Because it is also multicultural. You know, my neighbors from, I have a Cuban neighbor, from Chile, from Honduras, from Haiti, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, you know.

L: Wow, wow!

M: Yeah, I always look for, that’s why I told you I never had a problem, because I look for multicultural neighborhoods.⁹

L: Mhmm

M: And multicultural people. So then, you know.

⁹ She later told me that she feels more comfortable in multicultural neighborhoods. She had encountered places that didn’t want her because she was black. She found out about multicultural places to live through her friends.

L: Right. Um, so you've had a really good experience in the Bronx then, right?

M: Well, I would not have necessarily chosen that this, this house, I bought it, you know, like I told you, my mom got sick and we have to find her, to find a place quick and there were certain requirements, I had my partner and I wanted him to live with us, and so we needed space and...in Yonkers, which is where I really liked, I really, really, really like Yonkers to live, it was too expensive, it was, you know, so I could not, you know, Westchester, you know it already.¹⁰

L: Right

M: The property taxes, everything is more expensive. So I could not.

L: Okay

M: Otherwise I would not have chosen the Bronx.

L: Do you have any children?

M: No I don't.

L: Okay. Alright, and have you had any...I guess you have a partner now?

M: No, no, no, not right now. Not right now, but I have been in, you know, I was married, divorced early, and then I had this relationship for quite a few years.

L: Okay. Um, so how did you find out about St. Stephen's then?

M: Part 4 of my life.

L: [laughs] Okay

M: After my mom's passing.

L: When did she pass?

M: The next, May 4th is going to be four years. I went through a very, very bad period. And, um, I met Mercy, the, the, um... so I, somebody told me about ReServe, which is an organization

¹⁰ She later told me that she likes Yonkers because it is very pretty, has great views and is close to the city.

where people that have worked for the City of New York, they serve in nonprofit organizations with a very small salary, they pay \$10 an hour. And, so she told me about that because my brother said to me, "You need, you know, something that you have to be there at a certain time, whatever. You need something like that in your life." So I did, and I found, um, the place at ReServe at the Hospital for Special Surgery. I work in the Social Work department.

L: Okay

M: Because I did not want anything to do with teaching. Because I am very disappointed in the way the education system is going in New York City. So I don't want anything to do with it.

L: Oh no! What's going on with it right now?

M: Well, the way everything is tested, you know, teaching for the tests and all of that, and no, no other programs in the school. It's just the opposite of the way I feel. And now, the way it is, I cannot look and say to these people, "No, I'm not going to do what you wanted." I cannot. Now you have to, everything is given to you, it's very little creativity and so on and so forth. Very little room for creativity and I, you know. So I didn't want to do anything with the Board of Ed. And, um, so I started working there and there my job is to talk to the patients. I interview them, I, and then I tell them what we offer them because we work with a program that is called Voices 60+, it's for seniors. And, uh, you know, we help them out with whatever it is that senior need, the benefits, you know, and it's also, I work in the 7th floor which is rheumatology and, uh, you know so mobility issues, how they get to the hospital, uh, getting, collecting them with agencies that offer homecare, you know, those kinds of things. So I talk to the patients, you know, which is what I'm good at, talking with the patients. And, um, because also that I went through the experience with my mom, with hospitals and homecare and this and you know all of that, I, you know I can also empathize with them and really understand where they're coming from. And, uh,

so one of the patients there was Mercy D, and we were talking and she had been a teacher, and so I saw her a couple of times and then she told me, so I said, “What are you doing? What do you do?” So then she told me what she did on Saturdays. And I said, “Oh I know where Marble Hill and 231st Street is!” So she said, “Check it out, go!” So I came here and the rest is history.

L: So you’re taking, that’s how you found out about the piano lessons?

M: About the piano. That’s how I found out about the piano.

L: Oh, okay.

M: And then the Reverend, when I told him who I was, you know, my job before, he says, [slams hand down on table] “We need, can you volunteer?” And I said, “Sure, I don’t mind.”

L: That’s nice. So, this woman was taking piano lessons as well or how was she involved?

M: She teaches voice here.

L: Oh, that’s her downstairs! Oh!

M: That’s Mercy.

L: Very nice!

M: She was the one that, you know, that connected me with this place. I had seen this church many times before. But I, you know, I just never, I had no idea.

L: Okay

M: Because I, one of the schools that I came to was Kennedy High School, I also went to, you know, so I had to come to this corner a lot.

L: Okay. So, now we’re wrapping up your Bronx section. Um, you were here from the mid-‘70s on, right? So that’s a pretty tumultuous time, you know, the Civil Rights movement was, you know, going in the ‘60s and the ‘70s, did you ever see any of that or were involved in any of...

M: No, let me tell you, by the '70s it was down. When I was in college—I went to college from '71 to, 1971 to 1975—there wasn't that much, you know. Everything had already been, you know, settled.

L: Mhmm

M: In terms of, they were enacting things that had been passed already. So, you know, I didn't see any, no demonstrations, none of that. No.

L: Okay

M: The, the students were very political. And, you know, which is what I noticed the difference from now. That I find now that the students are, you know, very casual, they're not really...at that time when I went to school, this is like what I was telling you, politics was number one. Human rights, you know, people would start conversations about that all the time, about politicians and about this and that. That part I saw.

L: So were you really political as well?

M: I was. I had so many arguments with so many people. But now I leave it alone. They can think whatever. Now I'm older, let them...But I was very, uh, I got very agitated.

L: What kind of arguments did you get into?

M: Well, basically it was the liberals. You know, that I would get, because I am not, you know, the Americans are liberals. I found Americans so liberal I couldn't believe it.

L: Oh yeah?

M: So, you know.

L: So you argued against that? But, um, what about like the Civil Rights movement and you were still...

M: Oh no, with that, that I had to learn from them. No, with that I had to learn from them. I had to learn from them.

L: Um, and, in the Bronx there were, there have been social groups like the Northwest Bronx, the Coalition, the Neighborhood Coalition. You never saw any of the community protests or anything like that?

M: No, I never got involved. No, I never. No, no, I never saw that. I never saw that.

L: Okay. And so now, let's get to your travels. Um, I want to hear all about that because I'm sure you have tons of stories. You've been to Argentina, that I've heard of, um, India, South Africa, um, where else? [laughs] I'm sure you've been to plenty of places.

M: Okay, it started out, well I went to Spain with my mom, which was her dream. That's how we started. After my brother came and we were, you know, emotionally and financially, you know, organized, the family, then my mother and I were ready then to start traveling.

L: Did your father ever come up?

M: Yeah, my father did. My father came and then came my brother a couple of years later. My father lived in Chicago. And then at that time my mom and my father did not, you know, decided not to live together.

L: Okay

M: So my father lived in Chicago and, um, we lived here in New York.

L: Okay. Do you still keep in touch with your father?

M: No, my father passed away, before my mom. He passed away like ten years ago.

L: Okay

M: He was older than my mom so he passed away about ten years ago.

L: Did you keep in touch with him with, though, when...

M: Oh yeah.

L: And what about with people still, do you know people still in Cuba, um, do you keep in touch with them as well? In Miami? And now you have Facebook so...

M: All the time. No, and email. By email, we can get in touch with them.

L: Um, did you ever, I guess, I don't know, how has that, like, being able to stay in touch with people from Cuba affected, like, your life? I'm sure it's been really good for you at some points, right?

M: I don't know what you mean. I don't know exactly...

L: Well, I know, like, for me when I go to college, like, I appreciate a lot more being able to talk to my parents and my friends from home. Um, and I was just wondering if that was also, like...

M: Oh, I think I understand it. Let me see if I understand it. One of the things, yeah. When you are gone, you appreciate it more. But one of the things that I appreciate...

[Woman enters, asks about Milagros's jacket.]

When we go to Miami on vacation, my brother had his kids and he went to Miami for the first time, driving to Miami. And you know, yeah, the first time we were all together. And he found, they went, I think they went like, nearby to buy something, he and their friends that we were staying with, like three or four o'clock. We got there at four after driving so they stopped there. They came back at four o'clock in the morning. They had found, oh, my brother's friends and they keep calling each other, "Look who's here!" So we go to Miami and we find all of our friends. So after that my brother goes to, when the kids were little, he would go to Orlando to take the kids to, so it could really be a vacation, because otherwise it would be just talking to his friends. So we are always talking and reliving all the stuff. It's like an ongoing thing. But, uh, what I see in all of this, in the United States, and seeing the way Americans think, I am very

happy that I was born and raised in Cuba, and that my values and my way of looking at the world, I got it from there.

L: So what are the differences? What's different? What's the biggest difference? You said... [man enters, leaves] You said you were glad you were raised in Cuba because of what you've seen in America, could you compare the two?

M: Number one, very material. I think that, you know, Americans put emphasis—and not all, you know that is, it's not never all, you know--the, um, a lot of emphasis on material things. And since we had to go without things, material things were less important, in terms of who is the, the favorite girl, who is the favorite guy in the groups, you know. As a teenager here I think it must be very difficult. And I saw it with my kids. And I saw my students struggling, with a little boy telling the other one, "Oh, you look terrible." And, you know, so I saw all of that. And these things never happened to us, you know, my age group, it never happened. So that, you know, material. And, what else, that, that I was saying that it's very important, that it's very different from, um, oh! The respect, the relationship within people of different age groups. We hang out together. Of course, when I was 20 or 21 years old I would go out with people my same age, but when we have other events or even now I could go to a disco and sometimes when a band from Cuba comes in we all go to see the band, a guy that is 25 years old will ask me to dance, and a guy that is 80, you know. We do hang out together and we do respect the olders, the elders a lot.

L: Okay. But you've been able to practice that a little bit in America, like you were just saying if you were in a place where there are more Cubans, and you can do that better.

M: Right. So, right. Exactly. So those things, I'm glad that I have a different set of values. And then, of course in the family we always discuss it and I see my niece, I admire her a lot. She was born in Cuba, she came here when she was five years old and she married an American and she

had two daughters and I see it and she's trying to raise her the way we were raised. You know, the putting emphasis on certain, you know, what we think is more important and trying to put less emphasis on the other stuff and like that.

L: Okay

M: Mhmm. So those are the real things that are different.

L: Do you think that's a specific Cuban trait?

M: No, not necessarily Cuban, you know. Not necessarily Cuban. Most, like I said to you, I have a lot of friends from the Third World and see, economics is different, and the lifestyles are different, and that's why people have to be different. Americans are richer. Even though you have all of these federal statistics that people that... you know, I had these students that, you know, it was in the South Bronx, and yet they have all of these, you know, a TV is every bedroom, in every room in the house. For that, that is for us, that is unheard of. There was not a TV is every bedroom, in every room. There were some people that did not have a TV and they would come to your house to watch the TV. So, it's very, you know, different. So tell me, "These people are poor," and I will say, "They don't know what poor is."

L: What about, um, you obviously value multiculturalism. But I know, especially in New York, there's a big, like Pan-Latino movement where I guess it's, um, to culturally identify as Latino and not a specific, you know, "I'm Cuban, I'm Mexican, I'm Puerto Rican." How do you feel about that? Do you feel you could ever...

M: No, I'm in big disagreement with the idea behind it. I do not like the work Latino. There were a lot of, I was a teacher already when they came out with, were coming out with that word, and many people from the Spanish-speaking community told them not to use that word but the sociologists went with that word. Because Latino doesn't mean anything, it's a made-up word.

Now, I could see that they want the unity, and it is true. The unity. But it is very difficult to have the unity because the interests are different. We are very different people. It's not the same if you're talking about the people from the Caribbean, as if you're talking about the people from Central America, and then the people of South America. The, uh, colonization periods were different, the groups that were formed were different, the *economics* was different, the *trades* and the things that people did were different, and therefore, now that we are in the 21st century, with this economy, we are different. We have many things in common but many things that are different. So I am not necessarily in agreement with these people.

L: So what would you prefer? Would you prefer, um, people to only identify themselves as from what country they're from? Is that how you identify yourself as, you're Cuban?

M: Mhmm.

L: Okay

M: Because see, that's what I told you, and when I saw the things with my students, it is not the same, a kid that crossed the, uh...

L: Border?

M: The border. A Mexican kid that had to cross the border is very different a kid from Ecuador that got on a plane and came with both his parents in the same plane. It is *not* the same. It is not the same.

L: Right

M: So, um, and then what's going on, I am very disappointed lately, was what is going on, I do not trust these politicians, that they promise some of these things and they're not going to do it. So, that is an area for me that is like, a, a grey area, it's not...

L: And so, would you, do you identify as Black, do you identify with African Americans at all or do you feel pressured at all to...

M: No, as I was telling you in the beginning that I am not. I tell people, yeah I say to them, "What do you see?" and they say a black person. And then they hear me talking and say, "You have an accent." And I say, "I am from Cuba."¹¹

L: Okay

M: And for me that is enough.

L: Okay, very good.

M: For me that is enough. Now, I, in terms of understanding what people have gone through and all of that, that is one thing.

L: Right

M: But you, like I said to you...

L: To personally identify with a group, you're Cuban.

M: Right.

L: That's it.

M: Right, no, because then politically I don't identify with a group. I told you I went through this already, and these people are really fighting for their own interests, they want to control a neighborhood or whatever, and I am not going to identify because I feel that we all have to pay the same taxes, so...and then, as, by not identifying with them they don't like me because, I, so you know like, in voting I am a registered Independent. I don't want to identify with a Democrat or Republican. Because I may like this particular Republican but not the others, or this particular Democrat but not the others. So...I don't, I don't identify....

¹¹ I later asked her if she identified with the term Afro-Cuban. She told me the term was "totally wrong. It's for music, not people."

L: How has that, um, how have you experienced that during your travels abroad? Um, when they say, “You’re an American,” do you say, “Yes, I’m American,” or do you say, “I’m Cuban”?

M: No, I tell them, “I’m Cuban. I live in the United States.”

L: Oh wow, okay. And what do they say to that?

M: “Oh wow!” Yeah, they right away identify with me. They like me very much. Everywhere that, I cannot mention one country that I had any difficulty.

L: Wow, how many countries have you been to?

M: Oh, like ten or eleven, I don’t know.

L: [laughs] Do you remember? [laughs]

M: Well first we went to, uh, Spain, Portugal and Morrocco, that was my first big international trip. Then I went to London and Paris. Then I went to, um, went to Costa Rica. I’ve been to, um, Colombia—I was in Cartagena, it was a lovely city—Colombia, um, Chile and Peru—we went to Machu Pichu, [inaudible] educators we took that trip together—I’ve been to Brazil—which I liked very much—and Argentina—which I liked very much too—um, and then, you know, back to Paris, um, South Africa, now India. These are the places that I have been to.

L: Wow, what was your favorite place?

M: I can’t pick because they all have...Paris is one of my favorite cities in the world.

L: Why?

M: It’s so beautiful. It’s a museum. The whole city is a museum. I am a museum person, I like museums, and Paris is a museum.

L: Wow. Well, I think we’ll stop the interview now.

M: [laughs]

L: Thank you so much. Your story’s amazing.

M: [laughs] You're very welcome!

L: Um, is there anything else you would like to add at all, anything else...

M: I love America. I love the United States.

L: Okay

M: I am very happy that my family, that none of weren't able to come to the United States.

Because my life absolutely and completely has been wonderful because I came to the United States.

L: Great. Thank you so much!