

Aracelis Lopez Interviews Aracelis Otero October 23, 2020, New York

My name is Aracelis Lopez and I am interviewing Aracelis Otero. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Aracelis Otero: Yes.

Aracelis Lopez: Let's start giving basic information to share. What is your name? Aracelis Otero: My name is Aracelis Otero

Aracelis Lopez: How old are you? Aracelis Otero: I am 80 years old. Aracelis Lopez: What's your occupation? Aracelis Otero: Family assistant.

Aracelis Lopez: What is your racial identity? Aracelis Otero: I am Puerto Rican.

Aracelis Lopez: Gender identity? Aracelis Otero: I am a female.

Aracelis Lopez: What is your sexual orientation? Aracelis Otero: Straight.

Aracelis Lopez: Where are you from? Aracelis Otero: I am from Puerto Rico.

Aracelis Lopez: I just wanted to inform you that you don't have to share any information that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Aracelis Otero: Alright.

Aracelis Lopez: Why did you leave your country of origin?

Aracelis Otero: I left my country of origin because my mother used to tell me that everybody in this country was rich and I wanted to be rich too.

Aracelis Lopez: Why did you decide to come to New York City instead of another state?

Aracelis Otero: Because my father used to live here in New York. My father was here before I came.

Aracelis Lopez: Which part of New York you lived in? Aracelis Otero: We used to live at 87 West 103rd Street. Aracelis Lopez: What do you miss about Puerto Rico?

Aracelis Otero: I miss the schools and my family. My mother especially. Aracelis Lopez: What don't you miss about Puerto Rico?

Aracelis Otero: Can you repeat that question?

Aracelis Lopez: What you don't miss like what are somethings you don't like? Aracelis Otero: Oh! I liked everything in Puerto Rico.

Aracelis Lopez: Do you miss there now? Aracelis Otero: Now? No (giggles)

Aracelis Lopez: What did your friends and family tell you when you told them you were leaving?

Aracelis Otero: Well, my mother was telling me that I was going to be rich. I'm going to have a lot of clothes. I'm going to have a lot of food. (Laughs) but, I didn't get all that!

Aracelis Lopez: What were your expectations coming to New York?

Aracelis Otero: I wanted to see that my father used to tell me that the people were rich and it wasn't like that. When I came to this country we used to live in a storage room. There were only one room and the kitchen. We only had three beds and there were six of us living in one room. Yes, and the bathroom was outside. I remember there were three beds and one for my father and my step-mother. And I used to sleep with my sister and then my two brothers used to sleep in the other bed.

Aracelis Lopez: How did you feel living in those conditions?

Aracelis Otero: Well, I feel so bad because they were telling me that everybody was rich here and you know it was like Puerto Rico. It was very poor.

Aracelis Lopez: Were there other Puerto Ricans living like you guys?

Aracelis Otero: Oh yes! Yes. Almost the whole building was Puerto Ricans around there and there were a lot of Puerto Ricans.

Aracelis Lopez: When did you come to New York? Aracelis Otero: I came to New York in 1954.

Aracelis Lopez: Who did you come to New York with? Aracelis Otero: I came all by myself.

Aracelis Lopez: How were you received arriving in the neighborhood? How were you treated being a Puerto Rican?

Aracelis Otero: They used to say that the Irish and the Italians didn't like the Puerto Ricans. Yes, they don't like the Puerto Ricans, they used to hit the Puerto Ricans and used to call them names and the Puerto Ricans were afraid of them.

Aracelis Lopez: How did you adjust to the language and culture in New York when you first came?

Aracelis Otero: Well, it was very sad because sometimes you can't understand what a teacher was talking about, and when I came I was in the school Booker T. Washington Middle School on 107 street and Columbus. The teachers don't even care about you. One time I remember a teacher said to me "Why don't you just go back to your country?" Yes, they used to tell me that, they didn't care for the Puerto Ricans. I remember when I was in school, there was a big difference between the school in Puerto Rico and the school here. In Puerto Rico, you would respect the teacher. The teacher used to have a ruler all of the time and I remember the teacher in Puerto Rico would never hit me but they would hit my brother with the ruler. When my brother Ismael came to my mother saying, "Mommy! Mommy! The teacher hit me!" my mother would say, "Something you were doing, and that's your second mother!" (Laughs) But when I came over here to the classroom the teacher used to read the newspaper and they don't even care about you at that time. And let me tell you something, everybody had to pay for their lunch. I used to pay ten cents, my father used to give us ten cents. There was no welfare no nothing.

Aracelis Lopez: What were the new opportunities that were available to you when you came to New York?

Aracelis Otero: I starting work when I was sixteen years old in a factory. The boss was really nice, his name was Sal he was Jewish. He was really nice to me and I was sixteen years old and I still remember him. He used to tell me "I know you're not eighteen -you're sixteen!" (laughs) and then I went back to get my high school diploma.

Aracelis Lopez: Were there any opportunities that were denied to you because you were Puerto Rican?

Aracelis Otero: No.

Aracelis Lopez: Did you witness anybody else?

Aracelis Otero: No, no. I don't remember. I know my brother Alberto was in school. He graduated in 9th grade and he didn't know how to write and read because the teachers didn't care about him. My father didn't go to school to see how we were doing (laughs).

Aracelis Lopez: What in your life keeps you connected to Puerto Rico? Aracelis Otero: Connected to Puerto Rico? My family.

Aracelis Lopez: And the culture right? Aracelis Otero: Yes.

Aracelis Lopez: Because I know when you would cook it would be exactly how Puerto Ricans would cook and you've always kept it growing up.

Aracelis Otero: Oh yes, yes I do. I love my island, I love Puerto Rico so much.

Aracelis Lopez: How do you navigate a bilingual life? How do you manage to speak both languages in the city?

Aracelis Otero: Well, I was in school there and when you come to this country they only speak English. If you didn't they would make fun of you, your accent. That is why there were so many people who were so scared of speaking English because so many people would make fun of you. In Puerto Rico, we had a class in English for one hour. I remember learning how to read and write because we used to have one class and everything was in English in Puerto Rico. That's why it's easy for Puerto Ricans to learn English in other countries.

Aracelis Lopez: Where have you lived in New York City? And why?

Aracelis Otero: I love New York City. When I came from Puerto Rico and I moved to 103 St. That was 87 West 103 St. It doesn't exist anymore but we moved to 109 St. I love New York and let me tell you something when I came to this country in some buildings, I remember on Columbus Avenue between 100 St to 96 St they used to have a sign and the sign says "No Blacks, No Puerto Ricans, and No Pets." I still remember that because the Italians and the Irish don't like the Puerto Ricans that's why there was a big gang. You know the big gang, the name was The Dragons but it was the Puerto Ricans who formed that gang to defend themselves. Do you understand what I mean?

Aracelis Lopez: Yes.

Aracelis Otero: Yes, yes. Every time they saw a Puerto Rican they would hit them and that's why they became The Dragon. It was a big gang for only Puerto Ricans.

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

Aracelis Otero: Oh wow, everything Aracelis! I love New York, I love everything here now. Back then, I didn't like New York that much because they made so much fun of you. I was scared to speak English in the classroom because they were making fun of me and I have a friend of mine her name was Betty she was my best friend. She used to speak a little bit of English and I used to talk to her in Spanish. With her I learned a little bit of English but, they used to make so much fun of you when you would try to speak English. No, they don't even care if you speak English, now you can go with an accent anywhere and they don't make fun of you.

Aracelis Lopez: But, also how has your neighborhood changed since you came to New York?

Aracelis Otero: When I came to this country the policemen were really tall and they were Irish or Italian. When they used to see the Puerto Ricans in a group they used to say "Break it up! If I see you around here you're going to go to jail." And one time I remember his name was Malabe he was in front of the building without a shirt, he was waiting for somebody and the policeman came and just slapped him. Just like that. But, now they don't even respect the police and at that time they really did respect the police because you have to listen to the police, the police were really strong with people. But, now I see on TV the neighborhood changed...They don't even care about people that's what it is.

Aracelis Lopez: Is there anything you feared when you came to New York? Was there anything you were so afraid of?

Aracelis Otero: No. No. No.

Aracelis Lopez: When Hurricane Maria happened how did your hometown changed since you left Puerto Rico or the house you grew up in?

Aracelis Otero: My house is 112 years old and it's still there and I'm happy it's still there.

Aracelis Lopez: Do you have any advice for anybody who might be migrating to New York from Puerto Rico or wish you've gotten when you came to New York?

Aracelis Otero: Well, first I'm telling you I love New York. I love the doctors here, I like everything but, the problem is you have to be scared when you go outside now. There are so many people and they like to commit crimes and don't show any kind of respect even the children. Remember to put a mask on! (Laughs) Try to also find a job and start from there.

Aracelis Lopez: When you brought up the doctors I wanted to ask you how were they when you first came to New York?

Aracelis Otero: I don't think I went to the doctor when I first came to this country. I just know that they would treat you right because I know my sister used to go. I remember I went to a private doctor that was on 103st. My sister gave me \$10 to get an injection. Vitamin B injection. He was really nice to me.

Aracelis Lopez: Have you felt as if the architecture of buildings has changed throughout the time you have been living in New York City?

Aracelis Otero: Wait, here? This building. He shows a building. Aracelis Lopez: Can you talk about how the projects have changed!

Aracelis Otero: They changed a lot. When I moved here I had to be married to live in the projects. Now they changed and nobody respects them, they're throwing garbage on the floor everything changed a lot.

Aracelis Lopez: Is there anything I didn't ask that I should've?

Aracelis Otero: No I don't think so...Actually I learned in classes how to write better than speak English.

Aracelis Lopez: Oh! How were the churches when you first came to NYC?

Aracelis Otero: When we came to this country Holy Name on 96 St had no Spanish mass. The only church was La Milagrosa that was on 114 St on 7th Avenue. The other one was Guadeloupe 14 street. Around here there was no Spanish mass and when a lot of Spanish people started to come they would hold Spanish masses in the basement and everybody came together to say they didn't want to have it down there anymore.

We wanted them upstairs your mother remembers when it was downstairs...There was another gang called the young lords they used to go to college and some of them were nice. They were helping the Puerto Ricans. But, let me tell you something the Puerto Rican people suffered a lot coming here. In 1950 we suffered a lot. I was so poor in Puerto Rico and I came here and was still poor. Everybody in Puerto Rico had the mindset that they were going to be rich if they came here, that's what my mother said. Let me also tell you, I was so poor there was no refrigerator, do you know where we would put the milk and the meat? In the wintertime, we would put it in a cooler next to the window. I forgot to tell you that, we used to put them in there... (Laughs) That's the way it was...

Aracelis Lopez: Thank you very much for participating. I learned a lot and I hope the audience does too.

Aracelis Otero: You're very welcome.