

Aura Peña interviewed by Kayla Peña  
July 8, 2019  
Washington Heights, NY

Translation by Kayla Peña

Kayla Peña: My name is Kayla Peña and today I am interviewing Mrs. Aura Peña, my paternal grandmother. Today is Monday July 8, 2019. We are in the Washington Heights section of New York.

Aura Peña: do you agree audio recording that will be donated to the oral history archives being collected by Guttman Community College?

AP: I agree

KP: Do you give me permission to record our interview and allow me to share it with my class where it will be archived in the oral history at Guttman Community College?

AP: Yes, I give you permission.

KP: Okay grandma, thank you.

KP: What is your country of origin and why did you make the decision to leave your country of origin?

AP: My country of origin is Dominican Republic. I was born and raised in the city of Higuey, Dominican Republic.

KP: In what year did you immigrate to the United States?

AP: I arrived at the United States on February 17, 1968.

KP: How many years have you lived in the United States?

AP: I just celebrated 51 years of living in the United States.  
Kayla

KP: What do or do you not miss about your country of origin?

AP: At this time, I do not miss much about my country of origin. Because my children, grandchildren and great grand children are all here. My life is fully formed here. When I first left my country, I did miss my family. I left behind my father, mother, my siblings, friends, my daughter especially. But not anymore, I do not miss much about my country of origin.

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

AP: Well, when I returned home, to my family and friends, from the US consulate with the news that they had approved my visa everyone was very happy for me. At the same time, they felt sad because that meant that I would be traveling to the United States, an unknown country to me. My family was going to miss me.

KP: What did your journey to New York entail?

AP: Well let me tell you about my journey. I purchased my one way Eastern airlines flight ticket with a stop in Puerto Rico before landing in New Jersey. A cousin of mine that lived there went to pick me up. That was my journey.

KP: Did it go according to plan?

AP: Yes, I purchased my ticket, and everything happened as planned.

KP: What were your expectations of the United States?

AP: The US was not everything that I expected. I arrived with the thought that it was easy to earn a lot of money. People back home would tell me that you could find money in the streets in the United States. So much so that I gave away all of my belongings and came with nothing. I had to purchase everything here. I left everything in the Dominican Republic thinking that I would somehow get everything here. I even gave away my jewelry. It took me years to buy the things here that I gave away there. I also did not expect the cold and snow when I arrived. When I arrived, there was so much snow it was up to my hips.

KP: Where did you immigrate to in the United States?

AP: To Union City New Jersey

KP: When and with whom did you come to the United States?

AP: I arrived February 17, 1968 and I came alone.

KP: How did you support yourself economically?

AP: My cousin helped me find work in New Jersey. With what I made I covered my expenses and I sent money back home to my mother/family in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

KP: When and where did you find work?

AP: My cousin had a friend that was a forelady in a factory in Union City, NJ. Via this friend is how I found work there.

KP: How did the Union City, NJ meet your expectations?

AP: When I arrived in New Jersey I planned to stay and live there longer. But I had a problem, I was pregnant. After the baby was born I had to move because the apartment that I shared had a limit that only 4 people could live there. When my baby was born it was 5 so the apartment landlord told my cousin that I had to move immediately. So then, I moved to New York City. I had a sister here and she accommodated me in her apartment until I was able to move to my own apartment.

KP: Why did you decide to move to NYC?

AP: For the same reason I explained. When I had my baby I had to move.

KP: How were you received upon arriving in your New York City neighborhood? And in the United States more generally?

AP: I was well received. I arrived at my sister and brother in law's home. They had friends and some that I already knew previously. I felt good in my neighborhood in New York City that we were all Latino's.

KP: How did New York City meet or fail to meet your expectations?

AP: There were more Hispanic people than in New Jersey. Transportation was more accessible and for that reason more comfortable. Everything was closer to get to. Bus, subway, stores, everything was more comfortable.

KP: How did you assimilate into the United States culture after you immigrated from the Dominican Republic in 1968?

AP: I assimilated and got used to it because where I worked most of my co-workers spoke Spanish, if I went to the hospital they would find me an interpreter, most places where I visited I would always find someone that can help me interpret. I also enrolled in an English school to study the language and I practice the language. That helped me to defend myself much better.

KP: What jobs have you had in New York?

AP: I worked 16 years in a factory and my second job was at a hospital in the Bronx where I worked 18 years.

KP: What type of factory did you work in?

AP: Garment, there were mostly Latina women there. We did not earn much. Later I got a job in the Hospital with a better salary, a union, and that is where I retired from. I worked there for 18 years.

KP: What opportunities were available or denied to you upon your arrival to the New York as an immigrant?

AP: There were many factory jobs but when I had my baby, I was not able to file for maternity disability benefits because I did not have a permanent residency card.

KP: Where have you lived in NYC and why?

AP: I lived in my sister's home. Later I found an apartment in the same neighborhood. I lived there for 7 years and then I moved to this apartment where I have lived for 44 years.

KP: What was the hardest part about your move to NYC?

AP: Leaving my family, daughter and my friends. Also leaving the country where I was born and raised.

KP: What is your favorite part about living in NYC?

AP: The fact that my children were born here, my grandchildren, great grandchildren, the majority of my siblings live here now. My kids got educated here, they live here, and there are more comforts in living here. This is the capital of the world, where all tourists come and many that immigrate come here to New York City. There is so much beauty here. You go downtown and those skyscrapers so beautiful. Everyone that comes here on vacation visits 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Times Square, 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, wow! All those famous stores and expensive stores in the world.

KP: How has your presence helped shape your neighborhood in Washington Heights?

AP: Well I shape my neighborhood by paying my taxes, voting in all elections. My children also vote in all elections. My children were educated here, they are honest, hardworking and responsible and that helps shape the city.

KP: How has your neighborhood change since your arrival?

AP: My neighborhood has changed in that it was less populated when I first got here and now it is more populated. There were less businesses and we would have to go downtown to shop. You would not see those street vendors that you see now on every street such as fruit stands and different merchandise. People sell things in the street because it is a means of making an income when you are poor. There were many Latinos back then but now there are even more. There were more mixed races like Greek, Italian, now there are many more Latinos.

KP: How has your reception in your neighborhood and in the United States more generally changed over time?

AP: I have always been treated well. Wherever I go, doctors, they treat me well. I cannot complain the majority of people here are Latinos here and we all get along well in the neighborhood.

KP: What would you change about the current United States immigration system?

AP: What I would change would be that all those people that have been in this country for many years with children that have been born here, those that are hardworking, honest and responsible get their permanent residency visa so that they are not undocumented. That is what I would like to see changed in the United States immigration system.

KP: What happened in the history of the Dominican Republic in 1968 that motivated you to immigrate to the United States?

AP: There was a war in my country in 1965. Following this there were both economic and political problems in the country.

KP: What obstacles did you face while immigrating to the United States from the Dominican Republic in 1968? How did you overcome those obstacles?

AP: The first obstacle I confronted immediately after stepping off the plane in the US was the huge snowstorm and cold weather. It used to snow so much in February and I found the cold immense especially since I was coming from a tropical warm island. The cold was horrible. That was probably the biggest obstacle I faced upon arriving.

KP: What English language barriers did you face while immigration to the United States from the Dominican Republic in 1968?

AP: Well with the English Language because I did not speak it. Slowly I began to learn English. I always would find someone that would help me translate. Later I enrolled in school to learn English. And slowly I began to learn until I got used to the English.

KP: Is there something that I should have asked you that I did not ask?

AP: No, I feel that you asked me many good questions. Thank you very much sweetheart.