

Celia Perez interviewed by Stephanie Brown
October 22, 2018
Bushwick, NY

Stephanie Brown: My name is Stephanie Brown. I am interviewing Celia Lopez. The start time is 10:54. The location is Brooklyn, NY. Today's date is October 22nd

One important question will be I need your permission to interview you and to share with my class. Also it will be an oral report that is going to be in a collection at Brooklyn college. Is that OK?

Celia Perez: Yes.

SB: OK Celia. How old are you?

CP: Fifty-two

SB: What is your race?

CP: I am Panamanian.

SB: And your birthdate?

CP: March first 1966

SB: And you are from...

CP: Colon, Panama.

SB: When did you come to America?

CP: I wanna say it was around 1985

SB: And how old were you?

CP: About 19, going on 19.

SB: And how was that period for you?

CP: It was a very difficult time period it was very difficult time. I had to leave my country and look for better opportunities.

SB: Why did you leave your home society?

CP: I left my country, like I said, to better myself. To see if I could get a better education. There were a lot of things going on in my country. Lot of political things, religious, racial. Racial persecution, slavery, people were getting kidnapped from their homes. Basically my family thought it was safer for me to come to the US and pursue nursing school which was my passion. It was sad. I was scared of what was going on. I really didn't even fully understand everything that was going on

SB: Tell me about your journey in New York

CP: It's gonna be kind of hard for me to bring up all those old memories. Where do I begin? I was 19. I said everything was going on in my country. My family, well my mom, reached out to my Godmother who had already left Panama a while before I came and she was kind of established in New York, I guess. Well for us, we called what she had established. She said I could come as long as I found a safe way to come to New York. I could stay with her and go to school and get on my feet and she would help me and she would look after me.

SB: How exactly did you come to the United States?

CP: The journey wasn't that difficult. You would consider my journey, well not you, per se, but other people in my country who have traveled to the US, to New York, would consider my journey luxurious, just because... My journey to New York wasn't that bad. Other people died because of illness and unsanitary conditions on their way. I didn't have to endure any of that kind of stuff. I was able to get through safely. I traveled with another family member and we got here safely.

SB: What was your first judgment or opinion about New York when you first got here?

CP: It was loud, noisy, full of people everywhere. The buildings, everything was different than what I was used to. I was little scared. I went to my godmother's house, and you know, I stayed with her and her two kids. Staying with her wasn't what she made it out to be. She made it out that I was going to have support and love and I didn't have any of that stuff. I didn't have anything. It was very difficult for me. I felt very alone. I remember being on the subway with my luggage, scared, on my way to her house and everything was just so new for me. I was unused to these kinds of things. Pretty much my first impression was just scared.

SB: Did you get used to it over time?

CP: Of course. I mean yeah. Now I'm on and off the subways.

SB: When you arrived in the United States were you treated differently, or do you think people treated you differently since you were an immigrant?

CP: I don't think because I was an immigrant more because of my skin color. You know honestly speaking my skin color I'm a very dark shade and I think I experienced a lot of racism. People were rude, not helpful with directions...

SB: That must have been very hard for you

CP: Yes

SB: I'm so sorry you had to go through that.

What is the name of the neighborhood that you lived in with your aunt?

CP: Brooklyn

SB: What part of Brooklyn

CP: Bushwick

SB: Can you describe your neighborhood for me please?

CP: A lot of poverty and homeless people and abandoned buildings and dark streets. It was horrible. Like I said it was nothing like what my aunt made it out to be.

SB: Was that a big change from Panama?

CP: No, I mean you know what everything I just said compared to where I was living in Panama actually the living conditions were better. They were still better.

SB: How did the neighborhood change since your arrival?

CP: What do you mean? Bushwick, Brooklyn? You mean now?

SB: You said that when you first got to Bushwick there was a lot of poverty homeless people. Did any of that change over time?

CP: Yeah of course. People started investing and building coffee shops and shopping malls. Now the area is like a hotspot in Brooklyn where people go and hang out. You see less immigrants now because before you were living with people of my race and a lot of people from Mexico and a lot of immigrants that made up the community. Now you see a total mixture of people and businesses and it's totally different now. Less poverty.

SB: Have you experienced any violent conflicts or natural disasters?

CP: We had a few weather-related storms. Nothing compared to what I endured in Panama. I've experienced a lot of racism. Racism here in New York is blatant and dangerous. I saw a lot of my dreams burned to dust and I just kept getting knocked down every time I tried to do something I would have to get backup and struggle and try to continue my education. This is a hard country to live in. There are the few good people that you meet along the way, it's a hard country to live in, as well as my country is. So many things going on. I've lived in 6 different places in New York

SB: Which is?

CP: I lived in Bushwick, Red Hook, Inwood, I lived in The Bronx. I didn't like it in The Bronx. I met a lot of good people, I met a lot of horrible people.

SB: Did you have a goal when you came to the United States?

CP: Yeah my goal was to go to nursing school and become a nurse. Like I said, I had a lot of struggles. I struggled a lot to try and succeed. Eventually, I thank God that I was able to finish my schooling after a few years. I am now a nurse. One thing I can say about New York, it's full of opportunities. You gotta go out there and grab them. You can't sit still. You can't let political reasons or anything like that stand in your way. You just have to push forward.

SB: How was it like for you to experience coming to the United States and living in different places?

CP: It was hard. I kept on trying to find a place to be comfortable. Just be like normal and succeed. It was kind of hard. I wanted to move to a place where I saw more people like me.

SB: When you say people like you what do you mean?

CP: People of my color, people with my heritage, people who speak my first language, which is Spanish. People like me.

SB: What was your favorite neighborhood that you lived in?

CP: I would have to say Bushwick.

SB: What was your least favorite?

CP: When I moved to The Bronx.

SB: Can you tell me how those places are different? Like why you didn't like The Bronx that much?

CP: In The Bronx, there were not too many Spanish-speaking people. So I felt like I was an outsider, or I didn't fit in. When I went back to Bushwick, Brooklyn, 80 to 90% of the community is Hispanic. Other people migrated from their countries as well and had similar struggles to mine or even worse, so they knew how hard it was to succeed and work for what you have. I wanted to be around those types of people.

SB: And Bushwick had those types of people?

CP: Yes.

SB: Are you currently working?

CP: Yes.

SB: What was it like when you came here? Was it hard to find a job?

CP: Yes. It was very hard. The pay was not good. Not being from here and not speaking too much English when I first arrived didn't help me at all. That kind of weakened my chances of even getting a job. Eventually I got one.

SB: Where do you work now?

CP: Now I work at the hospital for special surgery.

SB: You said it was hard for you. How did you overcome the hardship speaking Spanish and not speaking English so other people could understand you more...

CP: I learned. I learned. I kept on studying. I never stopped trying to learn. I read books. I met a lot of nice people. People helped me but I read. I just kept reading a lot of books and I learned. I learned English. Now I speak it well.

SB: Do you still live with your aunt?

CP: No

SB: So now you live by yourself?

CP: Yes. I have my own condo. I'm very successful.

SB: Can you tell me how that was to finally live on your own in a place that's so different?

CP: I've been living on my own for many years now.

SB: Of course. How was it when you first made a decision to move out of your aunt's?

CP: I didn't actually make the decision to move out. I was forced out by my aunt and her boyfriend. Marital issues. When I moved out I got a room. I actually had to share the room with another person, another Hispanic person who had come from the Dominican Republic. I met her, we became close friends. We lived there for a few years until I was able to get something better.

SB: Did you like that experience of sharing a room?

CP: It was OK. It was better than being back home in Panama. It was safer for me.

SB: What about your friend? Do you guys have a good bond?

CP: Yes. to this day.

SB: So you're still in contact with her?

CP: Of course.

SB: When you first came to United States, how would you define the United States?

CP: Like I said before, it's very cold place, but filled with opportunities. The ultimate goal was to become a US citizen so I can have the same rights as others.

SB: Are you close to your community?

CP: Yes. I've been involved in my community. We've set up some concerts and some children's activities and some food drives and clothing drives. I'm very involved in my community especially the 83rd precinct located in Bushwick. I've done a lot of events with them as well. I like to give back and help people the way I was held for I was younger. I'm very fortunate.

SB: Did you ever think that with everything that happened in your life, did you ever think that you would ever step foot in the United States, when you were young?

CP: When I was small that was like a dream to me. It was a dream to come to the United States, to come to New York, and be successful. All the kids spoke about that in Panama. Getting out of that poverty, getting out of that violent country we lived in. So yes it was all a dream to me until it became a reality.

SB: How would you define immigration?

CP: Being an immigrant is when you're not from the US. You migrate from another country, most likely illegally.

Basically, that's what it means to me. That's what it means to be an immigrant and usually the goal's to become a US citizen.

What I can say is that my other family members... It was very difficult for them to become US citizens. A lot of people got here safely from my family and other people I know from the family... you know, it's hard.

SB: Like I said many times I'm sorry that you had to go through that and I'm proud of the progress you've made. Where there any obstacles that came in between you having a great job and having your own apartment? Can you tell me more about that.

CP: Money. Financials. I couldn't afford schooling, I failed my exams a few times before I became a nurse.

SB: Did you ever go to college?

CP: Yes.

SB: Which one?

CP: I went to NYU.

SB: Wow. That's a really good college. How was that for you? Obviously high school and college are two different things but... It was in two different countries but how was that different for you? Was it hard?

CP: It was really hard. Everything was different. My English... I was still learning English. I failed many times, I failed many classes. I had to drop out of school because of my financial situation. But I was able to pass my state board eventually and get my residency and now I'm here. And with no family here really it was very hard. All I have is my Godmother and a few cousins and they were not supportive.

SB: They weren't supportive at all?

CP: No.

SB: Did you ever, at any point, want to go back?

CP: No. The only time I ever thought of going back was because I missed my family. But I would not give up what I was trying to accomplish here and just pick up and go back.

SB: So you fought through it.

CP: Yeah. I fought through it and I knew I had to do better
Now I'm able to send money to my family and I've been doing that for many many years and I'm able to help them and their situation over there.

SB: So now that you're like, you're a citizen, you became a citizen.

CP: I got married.

SB: How long have you been married for?

CP: Over 15 years

SB: Congratulations. Did you ever return to your country to help out?

CP: Yeah, I visit now. I visit frequently.

SB: Were you ever scared at first? Like, did you go back before you are married?

CP: No.

SB: Why didn't you? You were scared?

CP: Of course. I think every immigrant, anyone who migrates and doesn't have proper documentation to travel back-and-forth is scared to enter their country, scared of the consequences, scared of not being able to return to New York and the life that you're trying to live.

SB: Do you have any kids?

CP: Yes. I have two.

SB: What are their names?

CP: I have one boy and one girl. I have Jillian and I have Robert.

SB: Can you tell me about your kids?

CP: What do you wanna know? Like, their ages?

SB: Just tell me about them. Like how are they?

CP: They're really good kids. They're both out of high school. Actually finished with college. My daughter graduated from Columbia. My son went to Hunter College. There really good kids they also travel back-and-forth to Panama.

SB: Did they ever ask you about your struggles...

CP: Yes. I let them know. They're very well informed. They're very informed about the way I made it here and the struggles I had to endure.

SB: Was that hard for you to tell them?

CP: Of course it was. It's hard speaking to you right now. It's bringing up all these old memories of what I had to do to get here and what my time was like here back then and the schooling. It's hard. My kids are very well informed. They know they have to be grateful for what they have and to be a US citizen. It means everything.

SB: I know a lot of people who aren't brave enough to tell their story

CP: My story, I prayed for faith and strength. Many days I was terrified, but I kept on getting up. So many didn't do well and they didn't make it so sometimes when I think about the times I had I wonder how I'm still alive to be honest. I didn't really get in depth with you about everything I went through because I don't want all my business out there, but I am giving you an insight, a clear vision of what I went through.

And I thank God every day, you know. Some people are received by others who made the journey before them and I was one of the lucky ones. To be in such a strange land with no support system was really kind of hard. Everything was just so different. So I'm just thankful. What else do you want to know Stephanie?

SB: Well, hearing your story was really amazing... for you to be brave, like I said, and I know how everything must have been hard and I do congratulate you with everything you've been through because you accomplished a lot.

What was it like to leave everyone in Panama to come here?

CP: Like I said, it was hard. I left my mom my dad my brothers and sisters. It was hard. I'm thankful that my sister made it to New York a few years after me. She lives here. It's really just me and her out here now. So I'm thankful to have my sister here.

SB: How old is your sister?

CP: She's a little younger than me. My memory is bad. She just turned 49.

SB: What did you guys do for her birthday?

CP: We went to a nice restaurant here in the city. That's one of the great things about living in New York, right? We have so many nice restaurants. So many things to do, so much to sightsee, museums. I learn about the history of New York.

SB: What fun stuff did you use to do in Panama?

CP: We just played outside. We were just happy to play with each other. We would make toys. We were not as fortunate as other kids nowadays. Especially here in New York. We didn't have electronics. No PS4s. Whatever these kids using nowadays. We didn't have any of those things. We made our toys and we were happy to play outside.

SB: You played with playstation?

CP: Well of course now. My son drove me crazy

SB: What was it like the first time you used it?

CP: It's still confusing. I still don't know how to touch those things. I just buy them whatever they want.

SB: It looks like you're living a great life here in New York City.

CP: Yes. I think I made the right decision.

SB: And why do you say that?

CP: Well, you just said it. I'm living a great life. But there was a struggle, but...

SB: Do you believe your life can get even more better?

CP: I'm just grateful. That's what I am, I'm just grateful. Whatever I have, whatever I get, I'm just grateful

SB: Do you have any regrets about leaving your country?

CP: Like I said before, just about leaving my family.

SB: But you wouldn't go back?

CP: What do you mean? Like if I had to do it all over again?

SB: Yes.

CP: I would do it all over again. I really would.

SB: Is there anything that I should have asked you that I didn't?

CP: Maybe you could have asked how I felt about all the political nonsense that's going on right now. I don't know if I want to get into all that anyway

SB: But I did ask you that

CP: I don't really agree with what Trump is doing now with immigration, trying to build the wall... Everything that he wants to do and his outlook on immigrants it's just horrible.

SB: I agree with you. Before leaving, would you like me to send you a copy of this recording?

CP: Yes

SB: And once again you are aware that this recording and this interview is going to be part of a collection and oral history collection with Brooklyn College and I will present this to my class and it's part of my project. Is that OK with you?

CP: It's fine.

SB: And a photo of you that will be given to Brooklyn College. And thank you very much

CP: Thank you Stephanie for listening to my story. Your questions were great and I wish you all the best.