

Daniel Nieves interviewed by Luz Hidalgo

October 16, 2019

International Community High School

Luz Hidalgo: My name is Luz Milka Hidalgo and I'm interviewing Daniel Nieves in International Community High School on October 16th, 2019. Do you give me permission to record this Oral history?

Daniel Nieves: Yes.

LH: Where did you grow up?

DN: I grew up in the South Bronx not too far from where we are now, which is 345 Brook Avenue. I grew up in Hunts Point... And most of my life I spend in The Bronx until I move away from The Bronx. I also was born not even a mile away from this place, the old Lincoln hospital.

LH: Describe your favorite meal growing up?

DN: My favorite meal growing up was Puerto Ricans called arroz con salchicha. It was my favorite; it is my favorite.

LH: Why it is, and it was significant to you?

DN: I guess the reason why it's one of my favorite dishes was because it was one of the things that my mother used to make for me all the time. I always look up to it, look forward to it whenever I needed to have a great day after a long day somewhere else, I will come home and ask for arroz con salchicha and mami siempre lo hacía.

LH: Was there meaning behind it beyond the food itself?

DN: I guess the meaning behind the food itself is that my sons love arroz con salchicha, all three of them. So, I think it's being a tradition that's been going on forever. so, everybody loves arroz con salchicha at home.

LH: Does a certain food remind you of loved ones?

DN: Yes. The one that reminds me of the loved one is arroz con salchicha again. My mother, my 3 kids growing up at home with a wonderful home. So that's the meaning of that meal and that's why I love to eat it so much.

LH: Do you have any memories in regards to preparing meals with an elder?

DN: I guess it's not a meal, it's more like a condiment: sofrito. Haciendo sofrito with mom, making sofrito with my mom, spending time together, caring the onions and the peppers, and putting them all together.

LH: What is currently your favorite meal to make or eat?

DN: My favorite meal to make these days... My goodness... It's been a long time since I haven't cooked but I do like to make... that's a good question! I guess it's chicken marsala.

LH: Why?

DN: I guess all the details that go behind the meal itself and the preparation and the love that you put into it. So, yes, it's one of my favorite meals. Veal scallopini is also one of my favorite meals I like to make.

LH: Is there any food you would not eat?

DN: Any food that I wouldn't eat... I guess liver

LH: Why?

DN: I just don't like the way it looks.

LH: Do you abide by any dietary restrictions because of your culture or religion?

DN: No really, people say that people shouldn't have morcilla because son hechas de Sangre, they made with blood. But morcillas are great con un aguacate en half sauce.

LH: Are there certain foods you only eat on special occasions?

DN: I would say el pernil, the pork that Puerto Ricans make every Christmas, we eat that a lot for those special holidays.

LH: Why is that occasion significant for you?

DN: Because it's the time of Christmas, it's the time of getting together with family, having a good time, and just eating together something that families don't get to do often these days.

LH: Who in your life cooks the best meal?

DN: My mother and I'll tell you why... my mother was the best cook because growing up I remember telling my friend, "I'm going to take you to the best restaurant in the world" and it was my mother's apartment cause she knew how to cook and also because she had a truck where she used to cook food for many people back in the 80s.

LH: What does eating well mean to you?

DN: Staying away from fatty food, staying away from candy, staying away from young food, McDonalds, Burger King, all that stuff. Just trying to stay healthy especially at my age... I mean, I'm a young but... You know! you got to take care of yourself.

LH: Do you have a favorite restaurant?

DN: Yes, I do have a favorite restaurant, home! I like to cook at home, I like to be at home, we look for resto piece to cook, we save money that way. So, I love the fact that you gather ingredients together and you make a great meal so...restaurant, home.

LH: How does the food you eat or cook make you who you are?

DN: I guess being Puerto Rican and people always saying that Puerto Ricans all they do it is rice, I try not to eat rice all the time because I would like to stay healthy so, yeah... you know eating rice once too. I guess it reminds me of heritage being Puerto Rican.

LH: Do you observe certain rules or traditions in regards to food or drink?

DN: For food is usually just a tradition of having people over, for special occasions. For drinks that's a whole different story, I didn't drink until I was forty which is only 2 years ago.

LH: If you could go anywhere in the world to try new food, where would you go and why?

DN: I would go to Greece, and the reason why I would go to Greece is because my cousin who is half Puerto Rican and half Greek, he actually owns a few restaurants in Charles, North Carolina and he actually has a restaurant with Greek cuisine and I love Greek cuisine. So, I would go for the cheese and the salads and the fish and just sit by the ocean and just have those kinds of meals with huge glass of wine.

LH: What is a meal/snack that you can eat all the time and not get tired of?

DN: Pizza, I can eat pizza any time of the day. Cold, hot, old, new, any time of the day.

LH: How does your income impact your food choices?

DN: With my income, I could go anywhere if I wanted to really eat but I have learned that as I get a little older I need to save money so that I can enjoy my retirement in the future and then I can eat anywhere I want to but I can eat anything I want to right now.

LH: How does your environment or the community you live in impact the food you eat?

DN: It impacts the way you eat depending of what you see other people eating so, in the Bronx, you see a lot of kids eating pastelillos in the morning like Luz used to do when she used to be here, so, that impacts the way of you eating but if you live near a farm, if you live near a place that sells just fresh foods it's gonna change the way you eat, its gonna change what kind of food you put into your body. For instance, perfect example is my cousin where he lives at, his community is all about health, is all about exercise, is all about working out, so they eat well according to the community they live with and who they hang out with. The same thing here, the same thing here at this environment, this community, when people see that I could pick up pastelillo at 8clock in the morning for a dollar, is fast food. Is it good for your body? No, is not but is convenient and sometimes that in the long run, you pay for.

LH: How do you feel about fast food?

DN: Fast food is really not good for you, I really believe that when you go into a McDonald's and you have a burger, I think they put ingredients so that you could crave for it, later on, a day or two later. So, is good to keep boys from those places, there's a lot of salt in those foods, so I recommend that people just keep away from fast-food restaurants. Is not good for you... I cannot remember the last time I went to McDonald's because I keep away from them.

LH: How do you think about health regardless to food?

DN: Is very important, I think people need to take care of their body because of the things they put into their bodies. I'll give you a view short story of a time that I was working a concession stand and I was making about forty burgers and the amount of grease that came out of that frying pan... and all I can think of was all that grease is gonna go into people's bodies, so, health is really good to keep in mind when you wanna eat certain foods. I know that sometimes is out of convenience but if you could as much as possible try to eat healthy because you gonna pay for it in the long run.

LH: Is there anything that I haven't asked?

DN: I think the one question that should have in this interview is how do you connect food with people? It's very very important. One of the ways to appreciate people is to make them a meal, is to sit with them. If you read history and I'll get to the book that I'm talking about, when people sat to eat, they sat for days. And they will eat and that's how you get to know people, you get to know people when you eat together, people feel relaxed, people want to talk to you, you heard the crazy stories over a slice of pizza sometimes. So, I think one good question that you should have in this interview is how does food connect people because it does, it really does... holidays it connects people, birthdays it connects people, so have that question in your interview next time. "How do you see food connecting with people?"

DN: I also noticed that you didn't ask me how has my relationship with food changed over time? I think the reason why food has changed for me over time is because when you're young it doesn't matter what you eat, kids don't care what they eat like I was telling you before, one of the things like to do here is that they love to eat pastelillos and drink a coke in the morning for breakfast, and as you get older and you realize that you need to take care of your health, you are careful with the things that you eat. So, for example, my relationship with food has changed in the last... I'm gonna say the last 5-6 years I try to keep away from grease food, I try to stay from food that is not healthy for me, so I do look at do research for things that will make my body better. One of the things that people do in now is eating organics so, I do try to eat vegetables that are organic, whenever I do drink milk, so, products that I know that are gonna keep me healthy is what has changed a lot with my relationship with food as I have got older.

LH: I missed to ask you, "Do you believe there is a connection with poverty and the food income families eat?

DN: Yes, there is. They have to look for the cheapest thing even though it's not healthy and when that happens health issues occur. Now I have a story for you, and I hope you're ready for the story. When I was a young boy, my father had a grocery store and... Would you... can you tell me what you think was the most selling item at the store? Can you answer that question? What do you think people bought the most in terms of food?... I'm going to tell you the item that families bought the most at grocery stores.

LH: What was it?

DN: Dot food cause they will eat dot food, it was the cheapest thing, it had meat... dot food believe it or not. So yes, it has an impact on what people eat and it comes to how much money they have.

LH: Thank you, Mr. Nieves, for your time.

DN: You're welcome! I really appreciate that you coming over and trusting me with your assignment for college and if the class wants to meet up with me, I go there.

LH: This was my interview with Daniel Nieves for my Oral History Project.