

Diego Chavez interviewed by Glenda Correias

October 27, 2020

Fresh Meadows, Queens

Glenda Correias: My name is Glenda and I'm interviewing Diego Chavez in Fresh Meadows Queens, on October 27, 2020, Diego Chavez, do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Diego Chavez: Yes, I do.

GC: So, I'm going to start by asking your name.

DC: My name is Diego Chavez.

GC: How old are you?

DC: 48 years old.

GC: How do you identify yourself as?

DC: Colombian

GC: Your country of origin?

DC: Colombia.

GC: So we are going to start with the questions. Why did you live your country of origin?

DC: My parents decided to immigrate to the United States.

GC: Why did you decided to come to the United States instead of another country?

DC: My parent's decision.

GC: What do you miss about your country of origin?

DC: The food

GC: What don't you miss about your country of origin?

DC: Crime.

GC: What do your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving?

DC: I was unable to talk to anybody before I left the country.

GC: Why was that?

DC: My parents were afraid.

GC: What were your expectations of the United States?

DC: I had no expectations, is something that was going to be new.

GC: How old were you at the time of your immigration?

DC: Eleven

GC: Okay, so now. Tell me about your journey to New York. What did Intel? Did it go according to plan?

DC: Yes. It was simple, back then was just get on a plane and go from one place to the other, no identification required.

GC: Even though you were coming in an illegal way?

DC: Yes.

GC: So, when and with whom do you come to New York City?

DC: With my mom and my brother.

GC: When was that?

DC: In February 1985.

GC: How long is that from, from now?

DC: 30-35 years around

GC: So, how did NYC meet or fell to meet your expectations. You say you didn't have any speculations about it. But did you have any thoughts?

DC: It was hard because a language barrier is harder than, especially when you're a kid.

GC: So, how were we received upon arriving in your neighborhood. Specifically,

DC: We couldn't talk to anybody we were always indoors; couldn't go to the party you couldn't go anywhere.

GC: Why you couldn't?

DC: Because my parents were scared because of the immigration status.

GC: So, your parents were afraid that you could get caught by the police?

DC: Yeah

GC: And be deported. So, they kept you inside the whole time. Were you able to go to school?

DC: Yes.

GC: Did people prevent you or say to you anything after or before going to school?

DC: Yeah, not to talk to anybody about immigration status or what my legal status was in the country.

GC: Were you afraid of ice back then? When you were a kid?

DC: No

GC: How did you adjust in your language and your NYC as a kid?

DC: You have to learn the hard way, there is a lot of bullying when you don't speak the language

GC: Bullying in school?

DC: Yes.

GC: How about the culture, how did you adjust to the culture?

DC: The culture wasn't a big deal it's just a language.

GC: So, you managed to get used to the culture and the American way?

DC: Kind of

GC: So, what new opportunities were available to you upon your arrival at NYC?

DC: It's a lot easier to go to school, yeah, a lot easier to go to school.

GC: It is a lot easier here than in Colombia?

DC: The school system here is not as good as the school system in Colombia.

GC: Okay, and how was that. How can be not good in here and good in Colombia?

DC: A kid that comes here at the age of 12 knows more than a kid this intent 11th grade in high school.

GC: So back in the day, it was more strict in your origin country than here

DC: Yes.

GC: What did the assimilation project look like for you? How do you blend together into the American culture?

DC: When you're a kid you adapt, when you are a kid its easier to adapt than when you're grown up

GC: Don't you miss anything from your country, your friends, or the way you lived?

DC: No

GC: Anything that keeps you connected now to your origin country?

DC: No, now just the food

GC: So, you could say you live the American way

DC: Up to a certain degree, Yes

GC: How's that?

DC: The American way, you wake up, you got to work you come home go to sleep, you wake up the next day and go to work. Once or twice a year you take a small vacation and just keep along.

GC: You say you learned the language, the hard way. Could just said that is over for you now, that y, you're done learning, that your English skills are good?

DC: English skills are good. Yes, not as good as they should be, no. I learn English in the streets not in school.

GC: You say you learn English in the street. How was it?

DC: I learned English with a few friends I had they would tell me to say things the way that I think they should be said, and they'll just correct me so 90% of my English is from the streets, very little from school.

GC: And how's that you didn't learn your English from school?

DC: I had to work in from an early age.

GC: So, at what age did you start to work?

DC:14

GC: So, you work at 14 years old, that's very early. Did you parents told you to do so?

DC: I chose to, to help them pay the bills.

GC: Were you able to find a job at that age?

DC: Yes

GC: Did you spoke English or Spanish, in your daily life, or Both?

DC: Both.

GC: So, where have you lived in New York City? What parts of it?

DC: Queens.

GC: And only queens, why?

DC: I like queens

CG: Have you always lived in a Hispanic community?

DC: Flushing is not considered a Hispanic community, it is actually mix crowd between Orientals, and Spanish people. French meadows is considered, some parts of Jewish oriental with and Hispanics.

GC: So you're, you're comfortable is the zone that you live.

DC: Yes, is a quiet neighborhood.

GC: You're a Quiet person

GC: So, what was the hardest part about you moving to New York City, moving from Columbia to New York City. Specifically, what was the hardest part?

DC: Leaving everything behind, everything behind. Coming to a new place and you don't know what to expect. To begin with, you have a language as a barrier. You have

no documents; you need to adapt. But the hardest thing is to leave everything behind. It doesn't matter how much you had or how little you had, you are leaving everything behind, everything you ever known. You are leaving it behind. And starting something new from scratch.

GC: So, when you said that, leaving everything behind you mean, your family, your friends, or the place.

DC: Everything, everything you've ever known.

GC: So when you arrived here, did the community made you feel like you belong when you arrived?

DC: No, I never dealt with the community I kept it to myself

GC: You kept it to yourself because did you think any harm could be done to you?

DC: Yes

GC: As a New Yorker, because now you're a New Yorker because you have, like, live here most of your life. What's your favorite part of living in New York?

DC: Used to be a safe place, not anymore. Now things are going back to the killing, the weapons, the shootings, Like, how it was back in the 80s, pretty much instead of going forward we're going backwards.

GC: So, in the 80s The thing was the gentrification, people moving in and out of the suburbs and AIDS.

DC: AIDS was in the 90s

GC: I mean Back then when you were younger.

GC: So you said that you don't have a favorite part of New York?

DC: Pretty much all the boroughs are the same

GC: But you like the neighborhood that I live in

DC: The neighborhood that I live in is a very quiet neighborhood, until about a month or two ago, they found somebody dead in the park.

DC: And that is what makes you wonder how safe the neighborhood is you live in

GC: So, you've been here since the 80s, you have you have lived through the change in here New York, the change New York has had. Do you think since your arrival here, what are the changes you've lived?

DC: Yes, neighborhood like I said, instead of going forward is going backwards.

GC: So, you're saying that there's more crime, and it is not safe anymore

DC: Crime is increasing, throughout New York. Is not anymore because Brooklyn, or because it's Flatbush, because it's Bushwick away or because it's Washington Heights in the city or Harlem in the city is just crime is increasing all throughout New York.

GC: Do you think that this high crime level is it because of the election times or because of the president that we have, or because of what?

DC: So the police,

GC: because of the police?

DC: The police can't do the job because they're not getting the tools they need, to do the proper jobs.

GC: So, um, that's pretty interesting.

GC: So do you think that in your reception in here in the United States, more generally. Do you think that has changed over time?

DC: Yes.

GC: So, could you tell me some of those changes who have lived through?

DC: It's hard to explain.

GC: So, as Colombian a how have you experienced any changes in community

DC: I'm pretty much always kept to myself

GC: But you watch the news right

DC: News are repetitive, every day, same thing, same thing different day.

GC: Life isn't that quiet, there is more, more than that, you know we're living in rough times.

DC: Times are what you make them to be.

DC: If you're gonna be outside and you've got to be socializing and going to various shows and whatever life, you're supposed to know a lot, I don't have time for that

GC: So you're telling me that you, as an American citizen. You yourself don't believe in the election times

DC: The damage that we have now, or the new damage that's going to come up. Bottom line, they are both damages. So, the million-dollar question is why you rather have a dummy that you already know what it is, or new dummy you have no idea what he is gonna do but a dummy is dummy. It doesn't matter which way you look at it, whether the Democrat or Republican dumb is a dummy. What is red or blue is just a color difference.

GC: That's your perspective on the government and everything, so you're just kept yourself in you don't really have a social life, any political life and economic crisis that we're going through.

DC: No, I work to pay my bills, pay my taxes, make enough money to be able to live comfortably, and that's it.

GC: So, you wouldn't change anything about the current US immigration system, would you?

DC: Immigration system as it is and the bad things, the precedent of people focus on bringing up bad things with the criminals coming into this country and is because they're not wanted in their country, they're gonna come here to do whatever they do in their country to make more money here. And then the other side of the image is the immigrants get the job to the Americans want them to. And the Americans hire the immigrants because they don't have to pay them as much as they have to pay somebody that's born here.

GC: So you'd say that Immigrants are cheap labor.

DC: Pretty much. So that's not to map to an extent, but that's about 70% accurate.

GC: Would you say that that has changed over time, that immigrants have more way to earn money today than it was 30 years ago?

DC: Yes

GC: If you've become a US citizen or are on the path to become a US citizen, Could you tell me how was your process?

DC: Expensive.

GC: Becoming a US citizen is expensive. Why is that?

DC: Is worth \$1,000

GC: 1,000 dollars?

DC: Almost, it will reach 1,000 dollars within the next two years give it or take

GC: How long did it take you to become a US citizen?

DC: I only did it because my grandmother wanted me to not because I really wanted to. So, it takes a person five years. It took me 10-15 years to become a citizen

GC: Because you weren't interested

DC: No

GC: But you had to do it because?

DC: To please my grandmother.

GC: So, you said that you didn't, you weren't a political person but here is the question. How has the politics of the last decade impacted experience as an immigrant in the United States, last decade or two decades. How has that impacted your life or your jobs. Because you said that you're here to work, how has that changed over time?

DC: To be honest with you it hasn't

GC: It hasn't changed for you?

DC: No

GC: So, is there anything you consider that I did not asked that I should have asked.

DC: No

GC: We pretty much covered

GC: So I had to do a question on a major event that you live here. So, could you tell me one big major event that you live through

DC: 9/11

GC: In your time here, has any event impacted your native country?

DC: No

GC: Son you don't keep yourself up with the news.

DC: No

GC: Okay, that's it. Thank you very much. Thank you very much