

Dolores Rodriguez interviewed by Tiara Smith
November 6, 2020
Harlem, NYC

Tiara Smith: My name is Tiara Smith and I'm interviewing Dolores Rodriguez in Harlemon Saturday, 25th. Doyou give me permission to record this oral history?

Dolores Rodriguez: Yes.

TS: Your age?

DR: Seventy-five.

TS: Race identity?

DR: I guess Latina. I'm Dominican, but you know.

TS: Where are you from?

DR: Dominican Republic.

TS: Why did you leave your country of origin?

DR: I had no say in the matter. I was underage and my father decided that he wanted to immigrate to the United States. He wanted to send me first and I came to live with mysister. I applied for a visa.

TS: Why did you decide to come to the United States instead of another country?

DR: I did not decide to come. I didn't want to go anywhere. I was happy. I was going to school and everything but my father decided that I should be coming here because he didn't want to getme in trouble. I was a troublemaker in school and in those days the United States had invaded theDominican Republic and my father thought that it would be better for me to be here with mysister.

TS: Okay, what do you miss about your country?

DR: I guess the people. I mean it's been such a long time that I really don't miss much. I've been here, let's see I came in sixty-five. Fifty-five years, so it's like all my life, you know I've been here all my life practically. I miss the people and I have family and cousins and you know friends, longtime friends in Dominican Republic, but that's it. I'm a person who gets accustomed to live in the present. I never look back I do try to live in the present. I don't go back to you know so I miss this I never did. That's my nature. I get to involve with the present to you know.

TS: So, what don't you miss about the Dominican Republic?

DR: Well, it's a developing country. I grew up in a farm with no electricity nowater. Then by the time I immigrated I was in one of the cities, but I can't say I don't miss anything or I miss anything. It's just that kind of thing...

T.S: Do you remember what your family and friends said when you were leaving?

DR: Not really, it was a long time ago. You're asking a seventy-five-year-old.

TS: So, what were your expectations of the United States?

DR: Well, it was a developed country and it was so much different. I didn't have any exceptions because I didn't know how it was until I actually came here. I wastoo involved with my studies and you know politics over there. So, it wasn't like I wanted to come here; you know it wasn't like that I was forced practically to come here by my father. So, I didn't have any expectations per say you know. It is what it is.

TS. True so when you came to New York did it go according to plan?

DR: I didn't have any plans. It was like a developing story.I didn't have any plans. I had to work when I came in and I didn't know any English.I had to work in factories stuff like that so it wasn't like I had a plan. I didn't plan to come here. I lived life like that I don't have any you know.

TS: What was the date when you came to New York?

DR: It was October. I don't remember the exact date it was October 1965. I think it wasOctober twenty fifth, I'm not sure don't quote me on that. Sixty-five.

TS: So, how did New York specifically fill your expectations?

DR: In those days I think it was better than what is now. Now it's too crowded and by the time I left New York it was too crowded, but to me it was like you know amazing. I mean don't forget I come from a not developed country, and it was fascinating you know it was different. It was something marvelous, I guess. I don't know but like I said I didn't know any English then. It was a task to learn English and I got involved with everything.

TS: Ok. Were you received positively when you arrived to your neighborhood? Like were the people around kind to you?

DR: Yeah, because in those days most Dominicans lived in the neighborhood. So, it was like a Dominican neighborhood in those days I don't know now. But in those days, it was Washington Heights 162 St. Neighbors were Dominicans you know it was a Dominican foothold in New York in those days. So it was nice, I had no complaints.

TS: How did you adjust to the new language and culture of New York?

DR: Well like I said first I had to go to work in a factory and I used to study English at night. I used to study by mail. Finally, after two three years I was able to get a better job. You know get out of the factories and my first job was prime mutual insurance company. You know it was hard because English for a Latin person or a person that speaks Spanish, English is hard you know especially the pronunciation and but, I mean I was young in those days. You learn easy when you get older.

TS: Would those jobs the opportunities available to you when you came to New York? Those jobs were the opportunities available when you came to New York you would say?

DR: Yeah, I had to work there was no question about it. Then my parents came then next year in March and then I move back with them but I was still working.

TS: Were uh were any opportunities denied to you because you uh came fresh DR?

DR: Not that I remember. No like I said I had to work in a factory and stuff like that. But I don't think I didn't find anything difficult. If anything was difficult was learning the language. I don't think I was denied any opportunities.

TS: Okay

TS: What did the Assimilation project look like for you? Assimilation?

DR: Assimilation? Well, I don't know what is meant by assimilation. I guess you had to...I don't know I really don't understand the question because it's...

TS: Yeah, me either. Well just move on. What about your life keeps you connected to DR?

DR: My family my cousins' stuff like that, not my brother my oldest brother moved back with his wife because most of his children, he wants to be with near them. He wants to be with his grandchildren and see them grow and whatever. So, you know I'm still connected and I still got cousins besides my brother you know.

TS: How do you remain connected to the people that are still living in DR?

DR: Usually over the phone or you know...what do you call that WhatsApp or whatever You know? But mostly the phone I would say.

TS: Was it easy to navigate your bilingual life?

DR: I don't know I wouldn't say it hard but was interesting. I mean it is hard to learn the language but you know, it was something that I wanted to do you know.

TS: Where have you lived in New York? And why?

DR: Let's see, I first came to 162nd then I moved to 177st with my parents. Then when they left the Dominican Republic, I think it was 1979, no I forget the year they went back to the Dominican Republic and then I moved to Queens. At the moment I don't remember the name of the neighborhood. And then from there I moved to Forest Hills and back to New York. Then when I got married, I was married for about ten years. I went back to the Lower East Side. We had an apartment there and then when we divorced. I went back to Queens, I was in forest hill again and that's where I moved from. You know from Queens moved to Forest.

TS: What was the hardest part about your move to New York?

DR: I guess I didn't want to come at the time.

TS: Ahh it comes back to that.

DR: I wasn't really enthusiastic about it, but you know I had to do it. And you know I don't regret anything no. It's just been a blessing because I think this country is you know more in tune to my ideas, and stuff like that but anyways what's next?

TS: What was your favorite part about living in New York?

DR: Living in New York, imagine you could go to so many places that I used to go. Normally to the movies but I used to go to Lincoln center and the opera house. Everywhere you go there is a lot of activities you could do in New York. If you have the money, I guess.

TS: Yeah, you need money to live in New York.

DR: Yeah, it takes money.

TS: How was your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

DR: My neighborhood?

TS: So, did you feel like the neighborhood changed from when you first arrived? I'm guessing that's what the question is asking.

DR: Well, no I don't remember. I mean I hardly remember any details, but I suppose it changed.

TS: I said yeah most likely it's probably changed.

DR: Yeah, you mean from now?

TS: Yeah, from now.

DR: Oh yeah definitely. I understand now that Washington Heights has been, what do you call that? Gentrified.

TS: Yeah.

DR: Alright

DR: So, I guess it has changed but I don't know I haven't been there in a while.

TS: Has your thoughts about like United States changed over time? Or Have they stayed the same?

DR: No, I love this country. This is where I spent all my life, so It's not perfect. Nothing is perfect in this life but you know it's changed a lot because don't forget they invaded the Dominican Republic. So, I was against the Yankees for a long time. You know then I was forced to come here but I have to see things to judge them. I mean I can't say that you know it was a bad experience coming here or anything like that. You know your feelings evolve so I guess I when I was younger back in DRI was against this country. But not anymore, I mean this is my country I became a citizen and everything so of course everything has evolved.

TS: That is true. Was there anything you feared when you first came here to the United States because you were considered an immigrant?

DR: No in those days there wasn't that divisiveness that people are making it now. Like you're racist. I wasn't thinking about those things in those days and maybe that's why I didn't experience. One time in New York in the train but in those days, you didn't think in those terms. You know you wanted today I don't know.

TS: Okay. What would you change about the current U.S immigration system?

DR: Well, I tell you I definitely don't agree with giving everything to illegal immigrants because I was legal. I came here legally I went through a lot to be able not that I wanted to but I was forced to. And so, I don't agree with giving illegals all of you know everything. No, you have to come here legally. And a lot of the things is politics ok a lot of the thing that they say legal no. You have to come here legally nothing like I don't know, I don't agree. With giving ok to I guess the children that are brought here but then a lot of the children are grown here. Not even their parents so I don't agree with illegal immigration to me You have to go through interviews you know, it's not fair. Nobody knew about welfare and things and that. Nobody thought of everybody that came here wanted to work and make a life for themselves you know. It wasn't like you come in now and they give you welfare and medical care and you know. Healthcare and then they should do away with the borders if that's the case they should do away with the borders. And no borders no country. Mexico is one of country that has the most restricted immigration laws. And I know for a fact because I went one time when I went with my friend, we crossed into Mexico I was in California. it was a long trip to California, but anyway we went to... I think it was I forget the name of the city in Mexico and then they stop me. In the Mexican border and they said, "oh I needed a passport and I needed a visa. And then you know it was hard and then coming back into California I wasn't ask for anything. I could have been somebody coming in here illegally. I don't know. I'm against all that.

TS: Okay it's a lot when it comes to that system. How was the process when you became a citizen? It was hard?

DR: No, you just had to know English and then they interviewed you. I don't remember the questions or whatever. That I remember it wasn't a hard process. Actually, I became a citizen in 1976, which was what two hundred years after the independence. Yeah, 1976.

TS: So how has the politics of like the last decade impacted your experience in the United States coming here firstly as an immigrant?

DR: I don't know politics is politics. I don't believe and today there's so much corruption in politics. Because that's what it is you know they go there and they like 50 years at the senate or 47 years or whatever. I don't know the answer to that question, don't ask me about politics.

TS. Alright we won't ask you about politics. Well, that concludes the interview. We thank you for letting me interview you.

DR. Alright your welcome I hope I was...