

Ayvette Santiago interview with Pedro Mendez

AYVETTE SANTIAGO: My name is Ivette Santiago, and I am interviewing Pedro -- what?

PEDRO LUIS MÉNDEZ: Luis Méndez.

IS: Oh, Pedro Luis Méndez. What is this place called?

PLM: *Bottom of the house.*

IS: *Oh, at the bottom apartment.*

PLM: *I don't know, house, apartment.*

IS: Can you tell me a little about yourself.

PLM: Sure.

IS: *No, no, no...*

PLM: I don't think you're going to ask me -- ask me in English, and I'll respond in Spanish.

IS: *Could you tell me a little bit about you.*

PLM: *Well, I was born in Puerto Rico, I came in 1952, 32 years ago, to America. I was married, I came with one children, and I raised nine children here. [00:01:00] All of them, most of them are married, I have two singles, Ivette Méndez, but she go to school, high school, and David, he work for [rig? - 00:01:13] company.*

IS: Your mom and dad, they lived here?

PLM: *No, my father and mother, they died long time ago. The died.*

IS: Where did they live?

PLM: The lived in Puerto Rico. In Aguada, Puerto Rico.

IS: Why did you come here to Bridgeport?

PLM: *Well, I resigned a job, as sanitary inspector, and I decided to start new life in America, because I was married, and on my, my parents died, and I decided to quit the job in order to make a new life in America. [00:02:00] Then I started working for different companies. I used to work for the City of Bridgeport, at the Dinan Memorial Center. I worked there for almost seven years. Then I worked for the same co -- for the same government, for the city again, at the sewage treatment plant for two more years, until I retired in 1979. After I retired, I went to Puerto Rico, I stayed there for 8 months, I came back, and I'm living here, at Barnum House.*

IS: The place you lived in Puerto Rico, was it [little?

00:02:56] you know -- where you lived in Puerto Rico?

PLM: It was a small town, Aguada. [00:03:00] A town called Aguada. I lived there for a period of eight months. I live with a sister, a younger sister. I was there for eight months, and then I left (inaudible), in 1981 here to Bridgeport, Connecticut, where all my kids were living, and now, grew up here, in 140 Barnum House.

IS: How many people were in your family?

PLM: I have eight children. My wife, who I am now divorced from, is 9, and me, 10. There were 10 of us. My family with my mother and father, there were 10 of us. [00:04:00] There were 10, of us 8...

IS: Did you go to church?

PLM: Baptist. I was part of a Baptist Church of Jerusalem, that was at 140 -- at 714 Boston Avenue.

IS: And did you go to church?

PLM: I always go to church.

IS: When you were little, too?

PLM: No, when I went to church, I went to the Baptist church, the evangelical church, in Puerto Rico.

IS: How much school did you complete?

PLM: I got through four years of superior school. I finished superior school in the town of Aguadilla. A town that's close to the town of Aguada.

IS: In Puerto Rico?

PLM: Yes. I finished high school in English, on June 14, [00:05:00] 1940.

IS: What kind of kids were there in that school?

PLM: What kind of kids? Ask that question in English.

IS: *What kind of kids attended the school?*

PLM: *We used to go, my same age, because that was in high school. Even so, I finished high school when I was 22,*

because I went late to school, I was sick, I stayed out from school many years. But about three or four years, because usually they finish high school at 17 or 18. I finished when I was 22. I was almost four years out.

[00:06:00]

IS: Every kind of kid? Like Puerto Rican, black and white?

PLM: *Yeah, everybody was, used to go together, like here. There was nothing about discrimination. Everybody would get together, everybody together. Black and white.*

IS: What classes did they offer in the school?

PLM: They had biology, English, history, world history and American history. Spanish. Spanish one, two, three and four. English one, two, three and four. They had American history, world history. They had geogr -- geometry, algebra, physics, chemistry. [00:07:00] Biology.

IS: And you were a...

PLM: I was a health inspector. With the Puerto Rican Health Department. I worked for seven years as a health inspector, in the Malaria Control Division. Or, the *Malaria Control Division. It was a division of the Health Department in Puerto Rico.* And the main office was in Santerse.

IS: What did you do when you were young?

PLM: Swimming, skating.

IS: Did you go out dancing...? [00:08:00]

PLM: How I did dance!

IS: And when you were young, what did you do?

PLM: I sold newspapers a lot. And I made some money, my mom and dad gave me some money. I bought my clothes, I went to the dances. I danced. I liked to drink. I don't drink anymore. That drink that makes everything visible. I don't dance anymore, I don't -- I barely go to parties. But I liked dancing and drinking.

IS: Where you lived when you were little, what was it like? Do you know?

PLM: Well, in those times, everything was cheap, life was...

IS: I'm asking about the area you lived in, if it was good or bad...

PLM: Yeah, the area where I lived was good, not like now, because before, before [00:09:00] you could sleep with the window open. And no one would steal from you, there wasn't all this theft that there is now. The situation is very different from what it was back then. There wasn't all this plunder, or theft, all this death. There wasn't the evil that there is today. We lived better. To the extent that that affects you, we lived better. There wasn't so much money. Now there's a lot -- there's more money. But

before, there was little money, and few things to spend it on, few things to enjoy. So, in a way, we lived better than we do now.

IS: You lived in a block, was it better than the others?

PLM: It was -- everything was almost exactly the same, because there wasn't theft, there wasn't the evil there is today. [00:10:00]

IS: You know in *the Depression years*, you know what that is?

PLM: The Depression, when the Depression happened,
(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

IS: And what was it like?

PLM: Well, it was good for me, because there was always, there was food in abundance, it wasn't like the United States.

IS: It didn't affect your family?

PLM: No.

IS: What did you (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

PLM: Are you tired there? Aren't you tired there? Look, here.

IS: How did you grow up? How did the family...

PLM: Or do you want to sit down here? I can go over there.

IS: No, no, it's okay. I'll stay here. And how did a family, how is it, if they did, if they lived well, did they have work there?

PLM: No, my family lived, as they say in Puerto Rico, we weren't rich nor poor. We were in the middle. My dad [00:11:00] -- he was a teacher -- got a government pension. He got a check from the US government because he fought in the Spanish-American War. And my mom didn't work. She just stayed home -- you know. She did housework. And my dad didn't work either, because he had worked as a teacher for a time, and then he retired, and he lived off his pension. A pension from the US government and another from the government of Puerto Rico. You know? So, he raised us, he raised eight of us.

IS: And the people, how did they...

PLM: Most people -- a lot of people worked with sugar cane. Cutting cane. You know what I mean. Or some business. Some people had businesses, and they lived a little better than those who worked in the cane fields. [00:12:00]

IS: Do you remember Barnum?

PLM: P.T. Barnum?

IS: Yes.

PLM: Well, he was a *showman*.

IS: Do you remember the big animals? Or Seaside Park, or anything, the *parade*? Do you remember that?

PLM: I don't remember that well. I don't remember if it was 1956 or '58.

IS: Not the year, about how it was? If it was...

PLM: I don't remember about that. I came here in '52, but I don't remember the story of P.T. Barnum well.

IS: Do you remember the war? The *World War I* and II?

PLM: No, I can tell you about World War II. World War II started in September 1, '79 -- 1939, [00:13:00] when the, the Germans invaded the Netherlands. They invaded Czechoslovakia, Germany, and all of the Netherlands. And Poland. And then, I remember when the Americans invaded Normandy, there in France. And the war ended in 1945. When, during the war, the president of the United States was the late Franklin Delano Roosevelt. That was the president that controlled the destiny of this country, when World War II started. Now, the United States entered the war when Pearl Harbor was bombed [00:14:00]. That was in Hawaii. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, it was a Sunday, December 7. That same day, the United States declared war on Japan. So, the Americans entered the war on December 7, '41.

IS: No one in your family went to the war?

PLM: No, none of my brothers were in the war. Friends, yes, but not brothers.

IS: How did the war affect your family?

PLM: Well, the war, being in Puerto Rico, well, products started getting scarce. Many times, you had enough money to buy something but you couldn't get the product. Especially lard, to cook, we often couldn't get. There were many things [00:15:00] you just couldn't get. They trafficked, the tax -- they accused the taxi drivers. Gasoline was almost impossible to get, you needed to buy it on the black market, as they called it. And you had to pay tremendously exorbitant prices. Higher prices. Cigarettes -- I smoked back then, I had to buy a pack of cigarettes, that normally, I would buy in a government center for 10 cents, but it cost a peso, often, on the black market.

IS: Now it's one thirty.

PLM: Now it's one thirty. But it's because the cost of living has gone up -- imagine, 40-something years and how much the cost of living has gone up. You used to be able to pay 25 or 30 for a pack of cigarettes, and now you pay a whole peso more. Everything tends to get more expensive with the passage of time. [00:16:00]

IS: Did the war affect the other people too?

PLM: Well, they took a lot of people's children, and, you know? A lot of people found themselves, many times, in difficult situations. The government didn't send checks on time.

IS: (inaudible) [00:16:34] I didn't ask you your name at the beginning, can you say your full name, and how old you are?

PLM: Pedro Luis Méndez Colón, that's my second surname.
Sixty-six years old.

IS: How many...?

PLM: *Sixty-six.*

IS: Okay, got it. How do you feel in Bridgeport now? How do you feel? [00:17:00]

PLM: How do I feel? I feel good.

IS: You don't feel bad or anything? Not...

PLM: No, the only thing I suffer from is my nerves. Like, I can't sign my name correctly, because of my nerves, but in general, I feel very good.

IS: Oh, ok, no, wait, *finish.*

END OF AUDIO