

GonzalezNancyMatos_20200713_video1

JANINE SANTORO: My name is Janine Santoro, and I'm here with Nancy Matos Gonzalez to talk about her life and experiences as a community leader in [00:11:00] Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as part of the Latinx Oral History Project. Our project has funding from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium, and we're meeting on Zoom today, which is July 13, 2020. So thank you so much for your willingness to speak to us today. We're so excited to have you and learn about your story. And to start, can you please state your full name and spell it?

NANCY GONZALEZ: Nancy Matos Gonzalez. N-A-N-C-Y M-A-T-O-S
G-O-N-Z-A-L-E-Z.

JS: Perfect. And can you please share your birthdate?

NG: January 27, 1966.

JS: Okay. And do you consent to this interview today?

NG: I do.

JS: And do you consent to having this interview being transcribed, digitized, and made publicly available online, in searchable formats?

NG: I do.

JS: Do you consent [00:12:00] to the Latinx archive using your interview for educational purposes and other formats,

including films, articles, websites, presentations, and other formats?

NG: I do.

JS: And do you understand that you'll have 30 days after the electronic delivery of your transcript to review your interview, identify any parts you'd like to delete, or withdraw your interview from the project?

NG: Yes.

JS: Beautiful. Then we are going to get started the way that most stories get started, which is from your childhood. So can you please describe some of the early years of your life, some of the things that were most impactful for you?

NG: Well, I was born here in Bethlehem. I am one of eight children. It was a very large family. Traditional Catholic family. And my parents are Ida and Maciel Matos. And if you grew up in this community here, commonly, if you were at any type of social [00:13:00] function, the question was always posed, "*¿De quien tu eres?*" So who do you belong to? Whose child are you? So it was always, Ida and Maciel. And my parents came here from Puerto Rico to New York, and then here to Pennsylvania. And they had, of course, one older uncle, Tío Calo, who had everyone. He was like the pied piper. Everyone followed him here. And he was the person who had the information of how you get a

phone, or how you have access to a phone, or different things. He was a wealth of knowledge. And they all followed him. And all of my uncles, most of my uncles came here, and so on, and even my aunt and so on. And we came here. And I will say to you that I had the benefit of growing up in a Bethlehem where the Latino community, at that time, [00:14:00] most of us knew each other. I wouldn't say it was a small community. I will say it was a close community. Because when families came, then other of their family members came here. And I went to Holy Infancy Elementary School. And Holy Infancy really, really was committed, even at that time, which was considered an Irish Catholic church. But it considered at that time to really provide a Catholic education for members of the Latino community, as well. And my parents did not have a lot of disposable income. We have very humble beginnings, absolutely humble beginnings. And Holy Infancy, when the younger siblings were able to attend there, it was a good opportunity, because [00:15:00] like I said, we knew everyone in the community. And that was a pleasurable time, in that regard. It really was. So I went to Holy Infancy. And being raised in my family, I will say that I think -- my siblings would also probably concur with this -- our parents, we didn't have a lot of money. We didn't

do a lot of things where we'd, say, we took a lot of exotic trips or anything of that nature. But my parents were, in my opinion, adventurous. Because they said, well, we have a vehicle. And we have food. And they would hike at every state park anywhere, anywhere across the state. Or they would take these long rides that my father had no way of knowing where he was going. But I said, well, how did you do that, Dad? How did we drive all these places? And he said, we asked people along the way. You just ask people. There was no [00:16:00] Google Map or anything of that nature. But it was very, very, in my opinion, brave of them to be willing to do that. To be willing to try and command the English language. Because for other people, it was stepping too far out of, even just to learn the language was just too far out of the comfort zone, understandably. But they tried very hard to learn the language. And they tried very hard to learn about their surroundings and have different adventures for the eight of us. Playing roller derby in the snow was fun for us. We had great home videos of that. But my father, we don't profess that he's the best businessman. And now he's going to be displeased with me saying that on the record. But he was willing to try many, many different ventures of the years. So it was seeking that American dream. It was

seeking, [00:17:00] this is the land of opportunity and plenty. And it is yours to really try and go out and do that. And so I believe that that is rooted in how my siblings and I have lived their lives, I believe, because we're all very different. And I think everybody has their own successes in their own ways. But I don't think any of us have forgotten our humble beginnings, which is, to me, our obligation. And that's what I think we do. I think that's what we have to do. And so it was a good opportunity then. It was a good time here. There was, I'm not saying that it was easy for our parents. Absolutely not. Absolutely not. I will say economically, the city was in a much different position with that Bethlehem Steel [00:18:00] being active and so on. So there were some opportunities, if parties were fortunate enough, to end up in positions in the steel that were... If you could get in you were set for lifetime, or that was the thought. And that provided some stability. So having a work ethic and drive and ambition also has to be coupled with opportunity. So that was a component, at that time, that I think was present and helpful. And for the early part of my parents' time here, not so much. But when they eventually grew stable and so on... But then towards the latter part, there was the Bethlehem Steel layoff and closure and all

of that, which is a whole different story. But in our child-rearing years [00:19:00], when they were raising us up, I think that that was a factor that provided some benefit to the families in the area. So I went to Holy Infancy. And at that time, Holy Infancy had a lot of students of Puerto Rican descent. And I was a very good student at Holy Infancy. I very much cared about school. I loved learning. And then I went to Broughal Middle School. And I, when I venture to guess how they determined what coursework was appropriate for me, what I will say to you is that, coming from Holy Infancy, I was placed in a program at Broughal that was called IMS. And when I came home, I told my [00:20:00] brother that I was in IMS, he said, Nancy, that lady might as well call that program I Am Stupid. So I was in this program. And they would give me this clear transparency to put over a sheet of work. And they gave me a blue, almost like a crayon, where I would write on this. It was individual instruction. And I would do the work, and I'd hand it back to the teacher. And I'd do the work and hand it back to the teacher. And she said, you do not belong in this class. You do not belong in this class. So there was an educator there who was my advocate. And I know that she advocated for me. And by the next year, they said, okay. She belongs in college prep. So I

was put in the college prep track at Broughal, or what's considered to be the college-level classes and so on.

[00:21:00] And for the first time in my life, it was the experience of prejudice, of being targeted, because I was Latina. And I had no idea that I was now called a "mira." Oh, she's a mira. What do you mean I'm a mira? Mira, mira, mira, that's all you'd hear people saying in the hall. You're a mira. And the things that, not all, not everyone, but things that people cruelly, cruelly just say to another child, it's just incredible. And so I very much then believed I was less. And from that point forward, I had difficulty [00:22:00] with committing to school, okay. So I would do well in school if I was interested in the subject. And if I didn't, I didn't feel that... These people know more than I do. They know more than me. They're smarter than me. I know less than them. And it was very, very self-defeating, because I could have taken a completely different, I'll-show-you attitude. But I didn't have the self-confidence at that age and at that point. And I became selective in what I was doing. So I was very inconsistent. And it took other educators... I would always be in college prep curriculum. I might get an A in one class. I might a D or an F in another class, or a C. And I was all over the place, because I was not being

groomed to be a college student. And believed that I was not as smart as these other students [00:23:00], primarily Anglo students. That's what I believed, because it was like you're the fish swimming upstream, what it comes down to, in that time period. And it took another educator, Marsville Himer, who worked with Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales, now DeSales University, who turned and said... Because her husband, at that time, worked at Liberty. And they said, you absolutely, absolutely have the potential to do well in college. You just need the baseline of study skills taught to you. You have the ability. And I had to go into a program that was a program for, like a month before I started school, to learn basic study skills that would help me on [00:24:00] the college campus. And at that point, I thought to myself, as the wheels were turning, this is really an opportunity. But I will say to you that going back to our culture, when I came to my parents and I said, I want to go to school, I want to go to college. Well, you have a brother who's in college. And it's important for him to go through school. So we cannot help you. And if you're going to do this, you have to do this on your own. So people have asked me, are you resentful over that fact? I understand that culturally, at that time particularly, I do not think necessarily this

is... We all grow in different regards. [00:25:00] And even my parents, in that regard. But at that time, the thought was -- and other women of my age -- it was important to educate the boys. And it was important to educate the boys. And so I thought, I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it. I'm going to find a way to do it. And again, through the guidance of Mrs. Himer, who today I attribute any successes in that regard, because she's been a wonderful mentor. And ended up, through the grace of God... I remember being in line, when it was registration time. And Mrs. Himer coming up to me and saying, get to the back of the line. There's not enough money yet. Get to the back of the line. So I'd have to go to the back of the line for the registration. And we'd be waiting, hoping that some other scholarship would come in or whatever it may be. And it was always, I worked hard in the summers. I saved a lot of money. I worked during [00:26:00] the school year. I somehow, again through the grace of God, it was at the last buzzer, enough to be able to stay enrolled. And so that's where, at that time I thought, this is really an opportunity. And I'm not going to blow this. And then I became very committed to my schoolwork. And at that time I thought, I wanted to save the world. I wanted to work with kids. I knew I would always work in social work or

some type of social services. But there was a priest at Holy Infancy, Father Juan Favish who, when I was at DeSales, my father and mother were involved with Holy Infancy at that time. And he knew I was a student down there. And so he called up. And he said, hey, [00:27:00] there's a center in Bethlehem. We need people on the board. It was the Centro Hispano, the Spanish Council they used to call it back then. Now it's the Hispanic Center and so on. So he was the first one that really brought me back into the community when I was at school, working for the community. And I was on the board for years, many years. But my college years, through. And that was enlightening to me, in addition to my father, who began with one of the founding members at that point, the Hispanic Political Committee. And things of that nature. My father likes to be involved in things in the community. And my parents, they were so involved in South Side Little League and so on and so forth. But [00:28:00] that was a very good experience, with Father Juan coming to the Hispanic Center. Because I understood, there's a whole political process behind this. There's a whole issue of funding. There's a whole issue of allocation of funding. And just having that experience and understanding that it takes advocates, advocates in that regard. And people to

safeguard against what are some ills that can happen to a whole community, is really important. So that was an important experience. And Father John was also the same person who called me and said, I do prison counseling on Saturday mornings once a month, or whatever. He's like, I'm picking up at whatever time. We're going down to the prison. I had never, in a million years, thought of ever working in a prison or in corrections or in the justice system. So I think that there are people who are meant to [00:29:00] widen your perspective and help you gear you towards that path. He was definitely one in that regard. So I ended up going down to the prison, and that was it. There was no turning back. Working out of the prison, I think I was 19 at the time, maybe 20. I think I was 19 at the time. And since that time, it's been in corrections for me, in the justice system. But that combination of working at the Hispanic Center at that point, and working with Father Juan, it also exposed me to other leaders in the community. And let me tell you something. There was one woman who worked with the president of the board when I was there at one point. And that was Sergia Mannes. [00:30:00] Describing her is very difficult to put in words. She was an etiquette educator. She had her story to tell. She has at this point passed. But I will

describe her. To me, she was our iron lady. She was always, always had a graceful appearance and just as graceful in her delivery. But she was a protector. She was an advocate, without any question. And she enlightened me about what it was like to really come to Bethlehem when there were very, very few... She was one of the first Latinos here. She told a story once in a meeting that resonated, and it stayed with me forever. She talked about how, when she came to Bethlehem, [00:31:00] she was so lonely, to even just hear the language, that she picked up the phone book. And began going through the phone book to try and find another Latin surname. The person she called, it was like a D, something, or a D, or whatever, Diaz I think it was, or something of that nature. But can you imagine how many names through the phone books to have gone -- and she called the person. And they very much welcomed the phone call and ended up lifelong friends from there. But hearing those stories, and understanding, truly, what it was to come here in the community, from the inception of when the Latinos first came, those stories have to be heard. Those stories should be shared. And I have so much respect for her. And I also, and Iris Cintron. Both of them. [00:32:00] Both of them. And Iris Cintron was also the president when I was on the board there. Utmost

respect, utmost respect. Because yes, they gained their own personal accomplishments. And yes, they were respected by colleagues in their field, after earning that, I'm sure. But they were there to protect others in the community and advocate for and try and guide. And so being young and seeing them and being a part of that, witnessing that, that was very influential, very influential.

JS: What would you say, because you've mentioned [00:33:00] advocacy a few times. Between your time in the prison counseling and your time with Iris and Sergia Mannes, what were the main issues that needed advocacy? What were the main problems or the main challenges for the Latino community at the time, that you were seeing?

NG: Well, a lot of it was such as going to the hospital and not being able to communicate and receiving services appropriately, because there was not anyone who could translate. Things like that. I recall a scenario where there was attention given to, at that time, what was considered to be aggressive approach from police. And it was at that time of Easton's police department. [00:34:00] And the board took attention to that matter. Making sure that social services, [La Casa?], that it was a place where people knew that they could come to seek services and advocacy. And really, those were some of the issues that I

remember, sitting at that table, going over. And often, it was putting out fires, new issues that would arise at that time. I remember voter registration was something that was considered to be extremely important. And it was also a center where there were a lot of different community meetings. I recall the mayor coming over for a meeting and having a roundtable discussion regarding what some of the concerns were in the community. But it was [00:35:00] a place that... And the history of that organization is that it was brought by a number of different organizations, collectively. So each of those organizations then, like it was the Puerto Rican Beneficial Society. They had their representative. And Holy Infancy Church had their representative. And I think there were five agencies total. But it was some of the community issues, or some of the same community issues. Different format, different scheme. But some were the same. Job placement, job placement. They had a job placement counselor at that time. I believe that they were trying to assist in that regard. Trying to advocate for people for hiring, some of the larger companies and organizations, like PP&L or whatever it may be. That also was partly through the Council.

JS: [00:36:00] So being influenced by these women and going into the prison, you said that got you inspired to be a part of the justice system in that sense. So that was your first, was that your first inkling of where you wanted to go? Or when you were in college, yeah.

NG: I had originally envisioned working with children. And I was a psychology major initially. I graduated with a psychology degree, but corrections was not... Right now, well, corrections now is a common major. It's a popular major in colleges. And our youth are very invested in social justice issues. At that time, that was in its inception. They were just bringing a corrections person on staff, to teach some courses. And I ended up making a minor from the [00:37:00] corrections coursework. But that was very, very much... So because I had wanted to work with kids, and I was interested in individuals who were institutionalized over crimes and arrests, I ended up working... When I graduated from college, I turned to my father. And he said, you have to work now. And I said, I already have a job. And he said, well, here's a good job for you. And it said the Catholic Social Agency. They were looking for somebody. I said, no, no. I have a job. And it was working, at that time, it was a maximum security treatment facility for the most chronic, violent human

offenders in the state of Pennsylvania. And there's not any maximum securities now. They don't exist the way that they existed then. It's more of a treatment process now. But then there were five in the state. One happened to have been in Northampton. I ended up working there. And I began as, [00:38:00] it was like a residential advisor. And then I became the caseworker. And then I became the senior case manager while I worked there. And that's how I began getting involved with the courts across the state, because I would work with all the juvenile courts across the state of Pennsylvania, representing that facility as far as what should occur with these juvenile placements. And extension of placements or discharge. So that's how I ended up getting in the court system. And on the heels of that, I shouldn't say on the heels of that. While I worked at Weaversville, by a strange coincidence or divine intervention, whatever you want to say, there was a gentleman, a colleague and friend who worked there, who was involved with politics. And he said to me that my predecessor was retiring. [00:39:00] And there was going to be an appointment for this position, because he retired before the conclusion of his term. And Senator Reibman, Jeanette Reibman, incredible woman, was very progressive in her thought process. And she believed that Bethlehem had

such a strong Latino influence, Latino community, that she thought it would be important to explore and seek out a qualified candidate for the position for consideration. And that is how I ended up going in to interview with Jeanette Reibman. There were a lot of people interested in the position. One was the son [00:40:00] of the state representative who had served for years in that same district. He had a lot of political influence. There were other members from the Latino community. And there were other members from, there was another party who was head of the Intelligence Division with the Bethlehem Police Department. I was 25 years old at that time. I went in to interview with Jeanette Reibman. We had a discussion, as she did with the other candidates. And she made what I absolutely believe was a very bold decision. She said, I am selecting Nancy Matos as the person that I will be appointing for district judge. Well, there was a lot of throwback at that, [00:41:00] from both sides. I will even say the Latino community, because there were other male Puerto Rican candidates that, the same board that I had been on board for years believed, well, he'll have a better chance, or whatever they thought that they wanted. And there was also, from the state representative and the police officer. It became a windstorm in the press. Who

is this person? Literally, there was a headline. Who is this person who she's selecting? And then it became a firestorm. It was incredible. It was incredible. She's too young. [00:42:00] She's not qualified. I had gone to school for my certification. I had received all the credentials that I had needed to become a magisterial district judge. It was something else. I will just tell you, every description under the sun of why I would not function in that office. And I was told, don't worry about it, because this is a done deal. This is a senatorial courtesy, which is a senatorial courtesy. Local senator, once there is somebody who leaves term in that way, prior to the conclusion of their term, they have a senatorial courtesy to appoint someone. And he said, she's definitely appointing you. She was. Well, the party who had a lot of political experience or influence found an obscure 1978 ruling that, on an odd-numbered year, after the first Monday in January, [00:43:00] it has to be an election and not an appointment. So they had enough political influence to get it on the ballot, despite Senator Reibman having the authority to nominate, to appoint me. So I learned that when I was at work. And I received a phone call. And it was a member of the press who was very interested, I'll say that kindly, in this. And the printed, so many things in

the newspaper which were not necessarily flattering about me and my incompetency, I would put what they were suggesting that they thought I would show on the bench. And he said, oh. So it's an election now. And I was on the phone with him. And he said, are you going to run now? And I said to him, I would never have pursued this position if I did not believe that I was a qualified candidate. [00:44:00] I absolutely am running for office. And I hung up the phone and went (laughs), how do I do that? How do I do this? How do I do this? I have no idea how to run a campaign. So then, you have to find a campaign manager. And again, unconventionally, my campaign manager was a student at Lehigh University who was working on his master's degree, who was involved in some local politics, had run for the state representative position at one point. It was not successful. He believed in me. I believed in him. He became my campaign manager. He is now on the bench in Philadelphia as a judge. Actually, he is the first elected gay judge on Philadelphia's bench. And then proudly so. And I'm [00:45:00] absolutely proud of him. And we worked. We worked like dogs, without question. But the first thing he said to me was, okay, you have to call 10 friends and get \$1000. I said, I don't know what friends that you have, but I can't do that. I can't do

that. So my uncle, my Tío Tito got on the phone, because my parents were in Florida at that time. And felt, because if my father and mother were here, they could have become involved more. And I was really, I was one of eight, so I had siblings. But I was doing this alone, as far as deciding to do this and how to do this initially. In the end, having eight siblings and their children, you know, everybody worked together so many times, stuffing envelopes and doing all of that laborious work, and helping on campaign days enormously, and strategizing, and so on. But initially, [00:46:00] I had no clue. So my Uncle Tito, I recall, he called. And this was his conversation with people. Bendito, lo puedes dar diez pesitos, diez pesos. Cinco pesos esta bien. Anything that you can start with any money. And that was how I raised my first thousand. It was by the nickels and dimes. And campaigning is a whole other story. The sense out there was, she's Puerto Rican. She's going to be partial to the Puerto Rican community. And it didn't make sense to me. It made no sense to me. I have never in my life heard, that judge is white. They're going to be partial to the white community. That's absurd. That was a fear of so many people. Or just, it was, I went door to door. We decided I would have to do a massive [00:47:00] door-to-door campaign and a huge voter

registration drive, which we were rewarded for at the end of that campaign, because of the mass amount of voter registrations that we did. But we were everywhere. I mean, we were everywhere. It was not just, go visit your super voters. I knocked on every door in South Bethlehem within my magisterial district, probably at least five times, each door. And I'm not exaggerating. At least five times. I'd get there, and I'd say, there might have been five registered voters there, and one was home. Well, are they coming back? What time will they be coming back at? Will they be back? Can I come back? Can I come back? And I would register... I would be at somebody's house. They'd say, you were just at my cousin's house on Saturday. We worked so hard. I was at some doors where... I was at one door. And this gentleman, an older gentleman [00:48:00] had me come in his home, closed the door behind me. I stood in his foyer. And he said to me, you are a Puerto Rican female, a woman. All that you wanted... And this may not be the proper forum for discussions of this nature, but I'm going to tell you exactly what he said, because this is what we faced. And he said to me, you are a Puerto Rican woman. I think he actually said female. That sticks right in my head. He said, you are a Puerto Rican female. All you want to do is lay on your backs and

have babies. Your husbands are all on drugs. And why would I ever vote for you? I'm in his home. He's an older gentleman. I've been taught to respect my elders.

[00:49:00] His son came out, because he heard his loud voice. The son was mortified, mortified. But he couldn't stop him. This was his opportunity to speak his wrath.

And I knew I could take every breath in my body. I was not going to change what his thought process was. And I'm not going to lie, I left there. I had a plan. My plan was to do, I think it was 40 or 50 doors a night. That was what I had to do every night. I left there. I went home. And I cried and I cried and I cried. Because it was face to face with him. And he said what was unsaid by many people that just slammed the door, or they... There was a lot of that at that time. It really was. And [00:50:00] I thought, what am I doing? Why am I doing this? And then by morning, I said to myself -- and this is true -- I said, you know what? Fifty doors is not enough. It's not enough. So then I went to 75 doors a night. And it was, okay. I have to combat that. So for every door out there, I have to hit more doors. And that's what I did. And I ended up, we did that. We did that. And so in the end, on election day it was, like I said, it was never more beneficial that I have siblings as I did, that were... And

I won that primary election by the skin of my teeth. Skin of my teeth. It was a handful of votes, handful [00:51:00] of votes that I won the election by. And let me tell you something. Before I knew I won the election, when I was standing at the polls -- and I will not forget this -- there was a woman who marched down the street. She was an older woman. And she said to me, Nancy, en todo mi vida, yo nunca Ido a votar. Viene hoy. I came today. And she came out to vote. She was 72. And I said, I can lose. It's not about me at this point. I feel that there was an energy. And there was hope. And there was a feeling of empowerment [00:52:00] in people. It was not about me. It's not about me. People want more. And with encouragement and, I'll humbly as possible say leadership, and I'm not saying leadership. I'm saying by corralling, and having that, people acted. And that race was a historic race, because I was the first elected Hispanic district judge in the state of Pennsylvania. It was 1991. I was the first. I have taken that to heart, as very, very, a huge obligation, [00:53:00] huge obligation. And I am in awe by that. I can't even think that it's me, just that that happened in Bethlehem. Incredible, incredible. Community can be very powerful. We are a passionate people. We are a passionate people. That is part of our

beauty. And when empowered, we can accomplish. I wholeheartedly believe that. And I'm illustrative of that, this position. So in 1991, I became the first Hispanic district judge in Pennsylvania. And then, within about a week after I won, I got another call that said, oh, so you know [00:54:00] that appointment with Senator Reibman? We're going to put that through. So I wasn't supposed to start until January of that year. But six months earlier, the appointment that supposedly wasn't a legal appointment, that they had to put it on the ballot, they said, oh, it's legal now. We're going to let that go through now, since you won. And then they allowed her to appoint me. The election gods, rather than just waiting until the election process, as they said, was necessary, to make it a legal appointment. So anyway, in the end, I was appointed. And so I had six months before the general election to prove myself in office. And that's a whole other story. But do you have any questions at this point? I've just been talking about so --

JS: No, it's okay. That's the purpose of this, is just to hear your story, wherever you want to take it. [00:55:00] But I'm interested also to find out, hearing what the gentleman said, and then understanding, wow. This is how so many people feel about myself and others in my community. What

were the things that gave you strength? What were the places you went to? Who did you talk to, to really stay strong during this time? You said after that conversation, you had a resolve. You said, 50 doors isn't enough. Seventy-five to combat all of that kind of thinking would have to do it. So you have proved to be incredibly resilient. But how were you able to take care of yourself during that time? Who were you able to lean on?

NG: Well honestly, my parents had just left for Florida in, I think it was January of that year. [00:56:00] And then within a couple of weeks, months later, I'm in all of this. And it was a difficult year. It was a difficult year. There's just no question about it. It was. But for that gentleman who slammed his door, I had 100 homes of people from the community, Latino community, who were, oh my goodness. So encouraging, so welcoming. It was a little bit of, like oh, isn't this cute? Look what she's doing. Kind of like, oh, isn't that nice? She wants to try and do this. And I was like, no, no, no. This can really happen. You have the power. I can't do this alone. I can prepare myself. I can become qualified for the position. But the power's within your vote. And so I [00:57:00] would say, God and family, period, that's it. And my campaign manager. My campaign manager, like I said, he was as

committed as I was. Not any less. Not an ounce less. Not an ounce less, which was a gift of God. So that's really, that was it. So I ended up being sworn in June 14 of 1991. I was 25 at the time, so you can do your math there. And I've been in office, this is, what is the date today? It's July, so 29 years. I've been in 29 years at this point. I thought I wouldn't make it, potentially to that next general election. I thought, well, for six months I can say, [00:58:00] we won. But when the general election came, we won that election two votes to one of my opponent. It was like, yeah, we really can do this. Look what can happen here. And people came out in droves. And it was beautiful. It was beautiful to see. Again, not really about me. Just the process, it was beautiful to see. And I say, beginning as a district judge at 25 years old, I will tell you very honestly, now that I look back, I think I had more guts than good sense, period. I had more guts than good sense. Because oh my God. And the way I came in, I look back now. And my predecessor was there for probably 35 years, I think. And he was adored. No one, [00:59:00] no one in this district, no district judge will ever have the heart of people the way John Gombosi did, nobody. And yes, he was a district judge in a different time. You could say, that's really hard to pay that fine.

It's okay, don't worry about it. Or he could, he was...
But really, he was very, very much aligned with the
community, Latino community, loved the people
whole-heartedly, was very good to people. He did justice
his own way. I hear stories forever of things that are not
really in conformity with the rules of judicial procedure.
But John Gombosi could do it. He was John Gombosi. And he
just, again, it was a different era. So I was 25. I was
the first Latina candidate. And I'm coming in under close,
close scrutiny, trust me. [01:00:00] And so when I came
in, I said, well, listen. My role here -- and to this day,
how I see my function -- my role here is to be neutral. I
do not work for the police. I do not work for the people
who come in, in the sense that I have to do favors or
anything like that. The best that I can do for my
community, the best I can do for my community is to do my
job honestly, honorably as I try to, meaning the straight
arrow. Where they cannot scrutinize and say, you did this
unlawfully. You did this. And make the community proud,
hopefully, that I have never tried to shame them. Being
under such close scrutiny. So I felt that, and this is no
[01:01:00] bad reflection on my predecessor, it was a
different time, where he, as a judge, could type up the
complaint to the police, that type of thing. You are a

member of the judiciary. When he came in under the alderman system, it was just a different time. I came in, and the police officers are behind a counter having coffee with the staff. I came in and said, no. You see this line here? This is a neutral zone out there. Not anybody coming in for their hearing, that gentleman coming in for the hearing, has to see you having coffee with my staff. Not going to happen. That was not well-received, trust me. I had to physically... A sergeant heard this was happening. Came across the bridge to try... I had to physically, physically stop him. I said, absolutely not. (inaudible) said, well, this is no fun here anymore. We're not here for fun. We're here to do our job. This is a court. It was like, this is not just... They saw it as a notary office or something. But the [01:02:00] minor judiciary had taken a turn and changed the qualifications, where it was more educational requirements. You wore the robe. You administered the oaths. It is a minor court. Where before that, it was from a justice of the peace or notary public, that type of system. It changed. And so it was more formal. But to institute those changes, let me tell you something. That was just a whole other beast to fight. It was. Again, being as young as I was, but I did. I said, this has... And then I completely, completely,

completely modernized the system, to make sure that it was administrative office (in line with) Pennsylvania court standards. And I went from running the campaign day at night, to revamping the office day and night, [01:03:00] morning to night, literally. But that's my way of service. That was my way of trying to say, we made your mark. That's my way to serve my community. That's my way. So look, it's been 29 years. And sometimes, I will say this to you, that girl who went from Holy Infancy to Broughal, that doesn't end. That doesn't end. So here I am, 29 years in office, going to school once a year for continuing education. And within the past five years, they have changed it where on your seat, they give you a name plate, Honorable Judge Whomever. Everybody in the state has their name. Prior to that, I would go out, judges school. [01:04:00] And without fail, another judge would turn to me and say, this is judges school. All judges in the class. They would say, oh. Are you here from court administration? You're the fish who swam upstream. Never failed, until we started getting name plates. Now, they don't ask me. They'll look at the name plate, like this fish doesn't belong upstream here. Without even realizing that's what they're doing, okay. So it just, you know, that will still continue. So listen, I've been doing this.

And the way I see it is, I had a huge burden and obligation [01:05:00] to not fail, number one. Number two, to come to the point where any judges school event, any Northampton County Association event, any representation of this county, I am doing that as a Latina. I am doing that representing my people in my community, in that sense, that I carry that. You may not be with me when I go. But I assure you, my goal is to represent you with as much dignity as possible. And that's what we do. So I [01:06:00] know I'm not the most popular woman. I don't make the most popular decisions. And this job has really been doing what you feel is right. I cannot live my life worrying about what people think about me. I can't. Or I never would have been able to do this job. Whatever I do, be it right or be it wrong, and I don't profess to always get it right, but I will say this. Every single soul who has sat before me, before my bench, I have cared what happens to them. And so sometimes... I am intense, because if it's a young person, I'm trying to communicate something to them, to give them food for thought. I'm not there to just shuffle papers. Let's have this as a learning experience. Let's have this as a moment. Yes, it is a moment of intensity. You're at that Y in the road. And so like I said, I'm not there to just shuffle papers. And

[01:07:00] it's always not well-received, perhaps. But it is never, listen. I read a quote once that I say to myself often, because I think it's important to keep ourselves in check. And it's from Abraham Lincoln. And he said, I'm paraphrasing. I apologize if it's not an exact quote, but it's just that it is hopefully in the message. He talked about how people say, oh my gosh. Look at what that person's gone through. That's a great man. It's a great person. And his position was, he said, it is human nature to persevere through adversity. If you really want to know the quality of a man, give him power. And I wholeheartedly believe that. I really wholeheartedly believe that. So when you ask me, who is my support system? [01:08:00] I purposefully spend time, in my personal life, with people who know me and love me as Nancy. So sometimes, it's isolating. And that circle's gotten a little bit in that regard. But my motive is always to do good in there. Whether or I do or not, that is my motive. I assure you wholeheartedly.

JS: You mentioned going in there and knowing that you were going to be neutral. And it's so important to be neutral, to be honest. And you said that you were changing, you were modernizing the way things were done. So to come in with all that change, and to have you be the face of that,

was probably difficult for so many people. Because they are used to doing things the way they've always done them. [01:09:00] And because you've been someone that sees this position as a service position to the community, like a position of servanthood, really. So you have power, but you are a servant. How would you consider yourself, in your current role, as an advocate or a change-maker for the Latino community?

NG: I think that the Latino community can be such a force for whatever change they choose to have. That whole election process, the first time around, was enlightening to me, to understand how it is really a select, chosen few who are the decision-makers. And it's the same way in government. [01:10:00] And it's the same way in policy. But there are ways that you can be part of that process. And a lot of it is the votes, long story short. I remember starting my first job. The director of the program -- that was the program for kids -- she said to me, you're here because you want to help kids. You want to help kids, he said, get into politics. Because you're the decision-maker that decides policy. Policies guide what happens. So to me, I hope that I am illustrative of what can happen when the Latino community decides to see something happen. I hope that it's a process of more or less saying, look, even if

it's a kid [01:11:00] who's walking through the door. We need role models. We need those teachers. We need the role models, so that you aren't considered, or think to be the fish upstream. We need people. So I hope that I served... I've tried very hard to work with the local schools, because to me, it's important to go in and talk to these kids. To say, you live in South Bethlehem. I'm not going to be here forever. You could be the next judge. You could be judge one day. I have them put on my robe. I have them sit on the bench and role-play. And one's a police officer, and one's a lawyer, and whatever it may be. I miss working with Sonia Donegan, who was principal forever. We did that many, many times. And I think we both understood the importance [01:12:00] in that. So I think just, in that regard, I think it's important. But I also think that understanding this was a political position elected in this community, first in the state, is something that... That can apply, if it's not to the magisterial district court, that can apply to state representatives. That can apply for whatever candidate they feel is the right candidate, or wanting to be engaged in some policy-making and position. To me, it should be the start. It should be the start, not the end-all. Or was meant to be the start.

JS: And would you say that, in your position or in general, within state and local government, that it's more open to the Latino community coming in and accepting positions and being in power? [01:13:00] Or do you think that's still a shift that really needs to take place? Do you think that a lot has changed in the time that you've been...

NG: Some has changed, yes. I do think some has changed. I think there's room for more, absolutely, no question about it. I mean, these elected positions, they're representative of the community, supposed to be representative of the community. And trust me, there are Anglo elected officials who are making decisions that they feel are in the best interests of the Latino community. But that's what I'm saying. If it's not going to be, okay. If we're talking about having more Latinos in public office, absolutely. I think that's wonderful, because there should be representation period. I always say the best things in life are also from our compadres, as well, whatever that may be. The restaurants, [01:14:00] the whatever, we want to be able to go comfortable and feel that yes, you belong. Same thing in city hall or wherever that may be. But I will say to you that knowing and understanding what decisions these people are making, and then knowing who you're putting in there, is also

important. So I just think, even if like there was a Hispanic caucus, different things that used to take place that I don't know are necessarily unified and occurring in that regard. But I do see some more success in elected officials, yes. Look at Olga Negrón. Absolutely, absolutely.

JS: What would be some of the major Latino movements that you've seen in Bethlehem over the past few years? And how did you participate in those movements?

NG: Are you talking about, [01:15:00] as far as marches? Or are you talking about just planned?

JS: We can interpret that as, well, it could be marches. But it could also be just anything that you saw within the community that could have been a substantial issue or problem, and the community pulling together to try and solve it or try to do something about it.

NG: So I have walked a fine line, as far as what I can become involved in as a member of the judiciary. I cannot become involved in matters that likely are going to end up before the court that I have to rule on. So sometimes, when there have been public statements regarding enactment of certain laws that may be helpful or not, that I cannot become involved in. Other times, it's something that just may end up as a potential as a filing. So I have to be careful, as

far as involvement [01:16:00] in that regard. From afar, there were times, over the years, that I have seen the Latino community really unite, as far as what their strong sentiment was. For instance, when there was the discussion about where Broughal School was going to be placed, they were talking about moving it elsewhere. And listen, there have been times where I haven't always agreed with what the position is, and other times I have. That was something that I think really affected the ins and outs, daily lives of a lot of kids on the south side here. So whether that was a good move or that wasn't a good move, it doesn't matter. The Latino community spoke up. They took action. And they saw results, which was what was ultimately the goal. And those are the things that have to be heard by school districts and whatever it may be. But that was something concrete that the community decided to do and successfully accomplished. That affected the lives of their kids, and many [01:17:00] kids years down the line. So it can happen. There's just no question about it. That's the most illustrative example that I can think of, what you're talking about, as far as a movement. Because that really was something that took a lot of care. I will say, this current movement regarding Black Lives Matter, where I think that every Latino, to some extent... There

are plenty in our Latino community who are Black. And we are many who are of color. And look, I will say to you that I have two children who are, my daughter particularly, good God. My children are very, very impassioned over social justice issues, as many young people today are. And even through this pandemic, I don't think I could have tied them down [01:18:00] to not go and attend their marches. And they are young adults. And it is not my role to tell them, yes they can, no they cannot. But I think that the young people today are impassioned and feel empowered to use their voices. And really, that's how things get done. That's how things get done. Action, in that regard. And they're not bashful in doing that. And so I think that that movement includes our Latino community. I do.

JS: And what activism or advocacy that you've seen for the Latino people, what's created space for their businesses, for their roles in schools, for community centers? And what do you see are some challenges in creating space and community still for our Latino community? [01:19:00] I know you mentioned Holy Infancy was a great community support for you growing up. And so there are places that you knew that you could find community. But I guess my question is, how has that shifted? What has changed? Yeah, what challenges do you still see?

NG: It has shifted in the sense that, well, back then, the community was close. But the community was also close geographically. It was mostly south side. And there were some who were the brave people who ventured out to, some in Bethlehem Township, some were out... This was back in the seventies, let's say, eighties. But geographically, the community was close. And they were also close in relationship. I think that's a bit different with the community now. [01:20:00] I really do. I think that there are different parts of the city that may have a higher population of Latino residents. But I think that Latino today means a whole lot different than maybe it did just then. Where there are a lot of interracial families at this point. And what's interesting is some feel an affinity with the Latino community. Some do not. You know what I mean? And it's just a whole new era. It's a whole new era. But I do believe that all want to be judged on their qualities as an individual and their ability, which is what everybody wants to begin with. But I will say [01:21:00] to you that, so I think that's a fact. That geographically, I think the Latino community is larger, more spread out. And I think that the community here, on the south side, my constituency -- not all, but some -- are still back, same as the steel days. The sense of living

here, a couple more family members coming, working very hard to earn their dollar, very humble beginnings, struggling. And people don't really understand that with that brings an ingenuity to people. That is a whole different level than intelligence to me. Tap into some of that, [01:22:00] and you're going to have a heck of a worker. I look at my mother, and first of all, I would say she's like Rafiki in *The Lion King*, making all these herbal things and cure-alls. She comes out, whips out something that, well, you do this for that. But we all have different types of intelligence, everybody. Everybody's intelligent in their way. And they have a different type of intelligence. One of the things that I rely upon, in my problem-solving skill base, is thinking of unconventional ways of solving problems. Maybe this can be done. Don't give up thinking, what can be done? That's my mom. My mother has a way of finding something to rig to this, do this, problem solved. And she does it in such a way that it's just... She's a very intelligent woman. And she applies it. She solves it. And she gets done [01:23:00] what she needs to get done. And point being that we are, the Latino community, yes, some people are saying, wow. That's a great base to go to for employment for a lot of the warehouses. Yeah, yeah. Well, once you [get us in?]

you're going to see something else. There are leaders among us. And there's a strong work ethic. And there's whatever it may be. So to me, it's building blocks. So part of the community here is young. And part of the community here are the old ones, like us. We've been here forever. So that dichotomy of learning yet how to get through all of this. I get concerned about, is the opportunity there as much as it was before? That I worry for this new people who are here. But I think that, and I forget what your original question was at this point. I apologize. I just kept [01:24:00] rambling. But I think that it means different things to different people.

JS: So we have about five to 10 minutes left. Is there anything that you think we missed, or anything, as you were talking, that you want people to know, that you think is really important? Maybe regarding your life or your history, but also maybe regarding the future or the current state of affairs in our community. Anything that you want to share.

NG: Well, I do want to share this. And this is a strange thing, maybe, to share, but I will. I will say that my father, when he started working at Bethlehem Steel, he used to work with plant patrol, and he worked with plant patrol. They asked him, what is your name? And he said, Maciel.

What is your name? Maciel. Charlie. Can we call you Charlie? Okay. [01:25:00] So he was Charlie. To this day, even when I was in high school, always, oh, you're Charlie's kid. Okay. So in my work, I have had dealings with parties who've come in from the Asian community, just filing different papers or whatever it may be. And I see the name "Steve" or "Oscar" or whatever. I'm like, Is this your birth name? No, it's just easier for people. Listen. All of us have yielded, in different ways, for different reasons, and at different times. And we can judge each other about that. Part of it is our own ignorance or not defending ourselves, whatever it may be. I was raised where, [01:26:00] by the time I was in school, it was, Nancy Mato, Nancy Mato. When I came to run for political office, this is like my tell-all here, okay. When I came to run for political office, I recall [and it was, what's your name?] Nancy Mato. That's how I'd introduce myself. And I recall the political people talking around me. And they were saying, well, you can't tell if she's Greek, Portuguese, Puerto Rican. If she had been, if she had had a surname that was more traditional Latino, she'd have less of a chance of winning. That was the political climate at that time. [01:27:00] People in our community have tried to buy houses. They can call and say, Gonzalez. Not going

to get a call back. Call and say, Smith. They're going to get a call back. Everybody's been there, from the community. Everybody's been there, at different levels. Maybe it's my swallowing my ignorance and being a little bit more brave about it. Or maybe it's just... Or maybe it's me being more brave about it, or just realizing I was ignorant. Whatever it may be. But it's very hard, in your 50s, to turn and say, you know, my name is Nancy Matos. It is. That is my name. And that's what I will call myself. And we have different cultures coming into the community. And let's not do it again. We're doing it again.

[01:28:00] It was like, oh my gosh. So I think we all need to grow in different ways. We do. Admittedly, admittedly. But if there's anything I want to say about my time in office, it's I was so fearful, when I started, that I would fail my community. I knew I would put everything I had into it. But I was afraid. Because somewhere in here is, can you really do it? And then you work with people who try and teach you that you can't do it. I think with bravery, brings the wind behind you that the Lord's sending you, to give you the strength and show you the way.

Because I've done stupid things. And [01:29:00] I've made mistakes and whatever it may be. But I will say to you, I have always been well-intended to try and do my job. And

for me, that is the best I've been able to do for the Latino community, is to do my job and to do it ethically and fair. And I've worked hard, and it's not just for me. That I will say to you. It's for this community. And I will say to you, because it's not... They did a judicial capacity study a few years ago. And they said, judge, you've been working 47 percent over the state average. And they said, there are other judges in the county who [01:30:00] are working 17 percent under the state average. So I have worked hard. And that tells you, almost twice as hard as other courts. But it has really been a privilege. And I thank my community.

JS: We're so thankful that you were able to tell us your story today. And are there any documents or photos or, we say artifacts, but anything that you would like to share for this project? You can always send it, or you can always scan and email. We can always talk about that. But if there's anything you can think of that, you think for history we should know -- about our Latino community, the history of the justice system -- anything that would help with this project for people to learn more about either your position or in general, the court system, that kind of thing. Or anything about the community [01:31:00] in

general that you think is important. Do you think there's anything you would want to share?

NG: I think I have some photographs and so on that I would pass on, from over the years.

JS: Wonderful. Okay, and we can talk about that after the interview. And lastly, do you know of any others that we should contact and ask to be interviewed? Other stories that you think help flesh out the past 50 years of the Latinx history in Bethlehem?

NG: Is Iris Cintron on your list?

JS: Yes.

NG: That's the top of my list. That's who I would say. That's my top one. And I'll give that further thought for sure. She's definitely a warrior.

JS: Wonderful. Well, thank you so, so much for everything. Thank you for --

NG: You're welcome.

JS: What's that?

NG: Everybody knows what a big baby I am now.

JS: No, no, no. I think it's the opposite. I can't believe -- I can believe [01:32:00] how resilient you are, and how, especially what you just mentioned, about just to keep propelling you, to just keep being brave enough. And even when you question, can I do this? And then to just be

like, well, what else can I do but try? What else can I do? So we thank you for your service. We thank you for your time. And we'll be in contact shortly to give you your transcript. And we'll touch base about other things you might want to share for the project.

NG: (inaudible) honor, honestly. I'm grateful to have this opportunity. And thank you.

JS: Well, we're very humbled that you shared your time with us today. So thank you, thank you. We'll be in touch. Have a wonderful day.

END OF AUDIO FILE

GonzalezNancyMatos_20200713_video2

JS: Okay, there we go. Okay, so we are recording. My name is Jeanine Santoro, and I'm here with Nancy Matos Gonzalez. And we were talking about her life experiences as a community leader in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as part of the Latinx Oral History Project, which has funding from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. This is a continuation of our meeting, which we just had. It is July 13. And we were just going to add some additional thoughts to our last interview. So again, thank you for meeting

with us. And we just want to go through the consent questions one more time. So do you consent to this [00:01:00] additional part of the interview?

NG: Yes.

JS: Okay, wonderful. And do you consent to having this part of the interview being transcribed, digitized, and made publicly available online in searchable formats?

NG: Yes.

JS: Wonderful. And do you consent to the Latinx archive using your interview for educational purposes in other formats, including films, articles, websites, presentations, and other formats?

NG: Yes.

JS: Okay. And you also understand that you have 30 days from the electronic delivery of this transcript to review your interview, identify parts you'd like to delete, or withdraw your interview from the project.

NG: Yes.

JS: Okay, wonderful. And so Nancy, thank you again for meeting with us. And yeah, if you have any other thoughts that you would like to add to your story for our listeners and for our students to know about our community or about you.

NG: Okay. Well, I would say that I remember, at the beginning of this meeting, saying that I wanted to work with kids and

I wanted to save the world. [00:02:00] And I have not saved the world. That's for sure. And I have, for a portion of my career, worked with kids. But I will say to you that really, what I sought in a career was that it was meaningful work. And this has undoubtedly fulfilled that, because this is very meaningful work. I talked about times that have been difficult, with elections and whatever it may be. You are an elected official. And there have been other circumstances that have not been easy over the years, because you're making decisions sometimes with parties that have mental health issues, as well. And sometimes, there's some distorted thinking and some distorted acts. And it had its own components that can be difficult in that regard. But I will say to you that I have had an enormous amount of support from my [00:03:00] nuclear family. My husband has been unwavering in his support to me. And my children always been respectful of maybe some boundaries because of the position that I have, and so on. But it's really the people, in this job, that I have come across that have been more than kind to me. Or take to heart different things that you say. And I have not realized what some things that may have had an impact. And then somebody comes back and... Even when somebody has said to me, I had a hearing with you. And you found me guilty, but

you were so fair. That is the biggest compliment you can give someone. I'm sorry they had a guilty disposition. I really am. But feeling that they went [00:04:00] through a process and were heard is important. And I try and begin every hearing by explaining what the process is, so people understand. Which is, I think, part of the factor, especially, that can be very intimidating, a court proceeding. But I've had scenarios where someone was fleeing, literally, went away to Puerto Rico. And I'd get a letter that they're wishing to surrender because of something that I had said in court. And they took it to heart. And they decided they wanted to try and change their lives. And they wanted to make things right. And they wanted to surrender, and would I help them do that? That that young man... And the thing is that I was not trying to hit him with the impactful statement. I was talking to the person who was in the chair. He wasn't in the chair. He was behind, in the courtroom. And I knew I wasn't reaching this young man. And I'm doing my darndest, trying to come up with words. [00:05:00] And he walked out of there. And I said, I didn't do it. I know I didn't reach him. But that the other kid in the back ends up, weeks later, communicating, took the time to communicate that, that makes it all worthwhile. One scenario that I

will always carry with me in my heart is a gentleman who had some mental health issues, a nice man. But he came in one day. And he didn't have anything. And he asked to see me. And I brought him in the courtroom to talk privately. And he said to me, I was going on the way to go kill my wife. But I decided to come here first. And I said, well, if you came here, it's because you know you need help. And are you agreeable for me to get you help? And he did. And we ended up at mental health commitment. [00:06:00] But this job is, you can't put it into words. People love you or they hate you, and sometimes both. It's not a popularity contest, even though you're asking for votes. You have to do what you feel is right. But it's people who lie, I know, that I'm dealing with. And I'm not trying to sound grandiose in that way. I just respect that. That even that traffic citation that's going to end up being a licensing issue, it is people's lives. It is. So I, respectful of trying to do meaningful work, I don't think I could function otherwise. And when they say, the honorable judge, no. It is an honor. It's an honor. And what I've learned out of everything, out of all my years on the bench, what I have learned in judging, I have learned not to [00:07:00] judge. Thank you, Jeanine.

JS: Thank you so much. That's a valuable lesson. That's a good thing to end this on, I think. Yeah, thank you.

Thank you so much. And yeah. So we will be back in touch to give you your transcript. And we're so excited that you continued, and you thought that this part was important. I think this is an incredibly big part of your story, and important for people to understand your role and who you are, as a person. Because not every judge is like that.

So thank you so much.

NG: Take care of yourself.

JS: Yes, you too. Enjoy.

NG: Okay.

END OF VIDEO FILE

