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JANINE SANTORO: Okay, [00:13:00] wonderful. So, well my name is Janine Santoro and I am here with Javier Toro, to talk about his life experiences as a community leader in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as part of the Latinx Oral History Project. And this project has funding from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. And we are meeting on Zoom today, which is June 12th, 2020. So, thank you so much Javier for doing this interview with us. To start with --

JAVIER TORO: You're welcome.

JS: To start, can you please spell your full name, and say your full name?

JT: Yes. My name is Javier Toro -- I spell it J-a-v--as in Victor--i-e-r, and my last name is T--as in Today--o-r-o.

JS: Perfect. And can you please share your birth date?

JT: December 29th, 1961.

JS: [00:14:03] Wonderful. And you're informed about this project already, but just so that we have your consent before we start the official interview, do you consent to this interview today?

JT: Yes.

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

JT: Yes.

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

JT: Yes.

JS: And do you understand that you will have thirty days after the electronic delivery of the transcript to review your interview, and identify parts that you would like to delete, or withdraw your interview from the project?

JT: Yes.

JS: Wonderful, then we are going to get started. And I mean, let's begin at the beginning. So, can you [00:15:00] tell me about the earliest years of your life, which would be your childhood as early as you can remember it?

JT: Oh wow (laughs), that was a long time ago.

JS: Yeah, but you can begin wherever you want to start is fine.

JT: I'm from Puerto Rico, I was born and raised in the town of Utuado. It's a town in the center of the island of Puerto Rico. My childhood was probably like a normal kid. I came from a middle-class family. My dad was, all his life, a salesperson or a businessperson. For most of this time he

was working on sales, and then for a period of time also he was an owner of a small grocery store. That was most of his life, by his doing. Working on sales. And my mom was a teacher. She was an [00:16:00] elementary school teacher for, I believe, thirty-three, thirty-four years. She always taught fifth grade -- that was the class that she loved. She was a Spanish teacher, and it was kind of hard for us now, because we had to speak good Spanish. (laughs) We can't make too much mistakes. We talk to her and try to use not too much slang or something like that, in Puerto Rico. But it was a good years. Like I said, my hometown is, in terms of territory, is not small -- bringing the scale to what is Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is not a big country, no? It's the third largest in Puerto Rico. The population at this moment is not that high, I think it's around 35,000 people. They used to be close [00:17:00] to 90,000 at the end of the 19th Century. And the reason for that it was because the coffee. There was a big coffee production place -- and I said "big" in terms of the scale of Puerto Rico. You can't compare those big countries like Brazil or Colombia in terms of production of coffee. And I was a kid that I liked sports when I was younger. I played a little bit of baseball -- I wasn't really that good. But basketball was my passion. Yeah, I played basketball. I

was fortunate to also play a couple of years when I went to college. And we have a good run there. Although, my passion was skateboarding. I loved to run skateboard. I was all over the place with my skateboard. I can't bring it to school because in Puerto Rico we don't have lockers. [00:18:00] They didn't allow you to walk with your skateboard under your hand. But other than that, in the area that I grew up, I am an urban person, let's say that. Even that my family came from one of the *barrios* in Puerto Rico, basically Caguana -- are part of this sprawl of the urban areas. And we name it in Puerto Rico "urbanizations," or "*urbanizaciones*" -- I don't know that is a correct term to use here in the United States. But walk a little bit in the outside of the town -- not that far, we can walk to the town with no problem, because I guess the town is not that big. The urban area. But that was one of my nice things that I like to do, especially in the weekends. Wake up early and [00:19:00] walk to the town, walk around the plaza, go to the farmer's market. And things like that I really enjoy, when I was little. I always be a person that I like to wake up early. I want to see when things started in the day. When people start getting out, stores start getting their deliveries, and things like that. I always enjoyed that. That urban

atmosphere is always something I always enjoy. I grew up close to a river. We go a lot to the river. We go fishing -- I wasn't good doing fishing. I never had that luck. Like, a lot of my friends, they always caught something, and I did not. The area where I grew up that was -- that had this particularity that used to be a field for a sugar plantation. That's a little bit weird, [00:20:00] because Puerto Rico is very hilly, there's a lot of mountains. And normally the sugar was grown in the shore. But because my town is a valley, they have a considerable big space that they can plant sugarcane. And I remember when I was little, walking to the river, and then we see sugarcane still there. We find out a short section looked like it used to be a railroad track. It probably was for the sugar plantation. I don't think it would be used as a mass transportation. It was just for to move the production of the sugarcane. We found a town -- a pond, sorry. Yeah, it was like quite an experiment for us walking to the river. That was part of our childhood, [00:21:00] how we grow up. Eating a lot of *guayama*. There were plenty of *guayama* trees and we ate a lot. And that's basically how I grow up there, yeah. Like I said, I practiced sports. The basketball was the one that I really enjoyed the most. It was a very nice and quite -- it was an old town. My

hometown was founded in 1739. Yeah, it's quite old. It's probably more than 275 years old. And they have a -- very rich in history. It's unbelievable when you learn the history of my hometown. It's very good.

JS: So, how did that history influence you growing up there?

JT: Yeah, they have a lot of influence [00:22:00] in me because in the same area that we lived, there was this gentleman, he was a dentist. Dr. Hernandez. We always referred to him as Dr. Hernandez -- his name is Pedro Hernandez. He was those self-taught historians, because professionally he was a dentist. And he used to have those very old Volkswagen Beetles, and they put inside that little car like four or five, six kids from the neighborhood. And he drove around the town and he started teaching us about places that we don't know yet, because we don't have access to that. And he wrote several books about history of Utuado. And I think that is the biggest influence that I have. And I study history -- that's my major in college, when I went to college. And I believe it's because of that, those conversations [00:23:00] with Dr. Hernandez, and those trips that they give to us around the town. Even neighbors that we have and neighborhoods that we go. Yeah, it definitely impact me in my childhood, that I believe that's why I study history.

JS: So, Dr. Hernandez was a big influence. And what about some of your family? Would you say both your parents heavily influenced you, or were there other members of your family in Puerto Rico that influenced you?

JT: Oh yeah. My mom definitely influenced me in the reading. I love to read and it's because of her. She's a very big reader. She loves to read. She's still alive and she still likes to read. And she always have books at home. We always had books at home. And that definitely -- and also, I have an uncle -- that's my mom's only brother -- that definitely he [00:24:00] have a big impact in my life. He studied geology, and I used to go very often to my grandma's house. He lived with my grandma all his life, he never get married. And we sit down to talk, and he talked to me about all the things that I never understood at the beginning, because I was very little. Talking to me about countries, geology, and stuff like that. We usually sit down together to watch a TV show that -- what is the name of that TV show? Oh, *Caran Del País* -- Facing Your Country. It was a political program that was people from different political views talk about it. But it was very good. It was very, very smart people that talked there. And I remember having those nights with him, sitting down to watch this [00:25:00] show. And definitely he was also

a big influence in me in terms of my political views and how I see the society. And of course, my dad. His passion for work. He was always a very good, hard worker all his life. He was a very caring person. Yeah, definitely we have a big influence from him, too.

JS: Did you have any siblings growing up, or any cousins that you were close to?

JT: Yeah, we are four brothers. I'm the youngest one, I'm the baby of the family. (laughs) Yeah, we are four brothers. We have -- two of them live here in Bethlehem. The other one lives in New Jersey. But we -- as being all brothers, and being the youngest -- that is the good thing -- you learn from the others. All the mistakes [00:26:00] that they made, you try to avoid it all. At least you know, you don't do that you don't go be in trouble. (laughs)

JS: So, to your point, what were some of the expectations you grew up with from your parents? Or what was the standard of how you should act, how you should behave, how you should grow up?

JT: Yeah, they taught us a lot of education. Not in terms of education to go to classroom, is how do you behave with people. How do you respect the elderlies, how do you respect others, how do you respect that we are different -- we are not the same. That was something that I learned

very young in my life from my family, that it doesn't matter what color you are, or what social background, or economic background you are. We're all the same. You have to treat everybody with respect. You want to be respected; you have to [00:27:00] respect the other ones. And that was a big influence that I always grew up in my family. Being Puerto Rican, we are all different. You can have same families all different shapes and colors and whatever. And I grew up with that, and I'm very proud to say that.

JS: So, there was this understanding that -- in Utuado, was it -- so, it was very mixed there, as well. You didn't find more people --

JT: Utuado, they have mix. It's not that much as mix as other towns on the shore, probably. Because what happened in Puerto Rico was, when they brought the slaves, they concentrate them more on the shore, because that was where the sugar plantations were. And they put them to work. Then we also have, in the center of the island, where the mix is not as big [00:28:00] as in the shore. You see more concentrations of African-American descendants in the shores of Puerto Rico than in the center of the island. Even though you had, but it's not as much as other ones.

JS: And what were the expectations for things like marriage or the kind of lifestyle they wanted you to have? It sounds like they were very open-minded, but --

JT: Yes, my parents -- both of them are second marriage. They were already married before, before they married themselves. And for us, that always was something, "OK, it happens it happens, it not happen that's okay." Because we have members of my family that never get married. And they have a very nice life, they have a very productive life, with no problems at all. And we don't see that as like a "You must get married." No, you get married if you want to get married. There's nothing forcing you to do it. We are not a [00:29:00] very traditional family, in terms of those values. They allow us to be the way that we want.

JS: And when you were going to school, in Utuado, did they -- did you feel comfortable there? Did you feel collegiality with your classmates? Or what was it like when you actually went to school?

JT: Well, in my time, I'm talking about the '70s when I first really remember in school. I graduate from high school in 1979. I think that the relationship that we have, in terms of friendship, was very good. You always have -- I don't know if that happened to you when you were in school -- you always had those groups of friends. This group is here,

the other group -- based mostly from where you come from in the town. There are [00:30:00] people, for example, from the *barrio* Las Palmas, where they congregate when at school because they know since they was little. I'm talking more when you get into high school, when everybody mix, because elementary schools they have plenty, middle schools they have few, high schools they reduce to one or two. That's it. And in my hometown, there was two high schools. And I studied at one that was in the *pueblo*, in the town. And there was another one in the *barrio* Ángeles, because it was a very remote place. And they need a high school for those families that live there. And it would be easy for them to get to school. But in terms of relationships, we go out -- we walk and drive to any places in the town. And I personally never have a problem with nobody. There was very -- I don't know the word to use, but a [00:31:00] very -- not naïve. I don't think naïve is the word -- correct word. But you were able to walk and go to places, sometimes you go into a river to refresh yourself, because it was too hot, and then you walk by a place that have an orange tree. And that wasn't a problem, you go and grab a few oranges and keep walking. Honestly, or any other fruit that you see, because you was hungry. You was a kid, you don't have money to buy anything, but you walk by and in

that farm, they have a tree there with some fruits, that's okay. You grab a couple, and the people see you, they say, "Hey, what are you doing?" "Oh, we were hungry, we want an orange." "OK, go and get it, no problem." If they have extra, they give it to you. At that time, the people was very open to relationships with others, even that you don't know. Because it's a small town, also -- and because my mother was a teacher for [00:32:00] so many years. If you mention the name of my mom, "Oh yeah, I remember your mom, she taught me," or "she was the teacher of my sons," or whatever. That was a kind of a thing that was -- a good thing and a bad thing (laughs), because everybody knows you. You do something bad; they know this is Mrs. Capatía's son. But it was nice -- it was nice that type of life, I really loved.

JS: And so, while you were in school, did you feel that your history as a Puerto Rican was celebrated? Was represented? Or do you feel like, in some ways, it's misrepresented?

JT: Well, living in Puerto Rico, and born and raised there, is -- sometimes it's a challenge to express -- at least [00:33:00] in my time -- to express how do you feel as a Puerto Rican? Probably you know, Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States, and has been a colony for more than 500 years. And in the first few decades of the 20th

Century, there was a lot of conflict between the Puerto Ricans and the government of the United States in Puerto Rico. And they tried, the Puerto Ricans, to not express themselves as Puerto Ricans. First of all, when they invade us in 1898, they established a military regime for a few years. Then they changed it to a civil regime, they said, but the governor was always appointed by the President of the United States. We never have a [00:34:00] governor elected until 1952 -- did we elect the first governor by the Puerto Ricans. Sorry, 1948. Sorry, my mistake, 1948. And then, there was always a time in the decades of the '30s, '40s, even in the '50s, there was a revolution in Puerto Rico, that my hometown has the distinction of being the only American territory that was bombarded by the United States. They threw bombs in my hometown in order to stop the revolution. Then, after that, there was a law that was passed in Puerto Rico -- the Law 53 -- and it was named *La Ley de La* [00:35:00] *Mordaza*, where anyone that expressed anything related to independence for Puerto Rico, you went to jail. They incarcerated you, no question asked. Even people went to jail because they wrote a poem, and they may have the word "independence" in there. Before 1952, it was illegal to carry the Puerto Rican flag. Yeah, when they -- in 1952,

when they established our own constitution, there was the creation of what was named the *Estado Libre Asociado*, and they adopt the Puerto Rican flag as their flag. But they always both was raised in Puerto Rico -- the American and the Puerto Rican flag. And that's why when you was a person that spoke openly about being Puerto Rican and want independence for your country, [00:36:00] you run into some issues. There are people that don't like to talk to you about that, and they want to continue having a friendship with you. You can get into police problems. I remember one time I was a member of a group, we was a group anti-atomic bombs. And sometimes we had to have our meetings in the outdoors, to avoid being recorded. And that is normal -- not normal, but it happened very often in Puerto Rico. Actually, I believe they released a documentary not that long ago that is named *Las Carpetas*, because it referred to the files that the governor of Puerto Rico and the FBI create -- to most of the people, that they understand, they create problem because they believe in the independence of Puerto Rico. In that term, [00:37:00] you have to be sometimes a little cautious when you talk to somebody about that. How openly you talk. I remember having friends that see me carrying a book, they say, "Why you carrying that kind of book?" "Well, because

I like to read that." "Well, you know you can get in trouble." "Well, yeah, I know, but what do you want me to do? Hide it? No, I don't want to hide it. I'm in my country, why I need to hide that?"

JS: So, you still felt some pressure from people to not talk about certain things in the '70s? Or would you say --?

JT: Oh yeah, definitely. Definitely, yeah, '70s and early-80s. Even when I was in college. Some guys in college expressed to me those concerns.

JS: So, speaking of going into college, so you attended college in Puerto Rico, correct?

JT: Yes.

JS: What college [00:38:00] did you attend?

JT: I went to a private university -- *Universidad Interamericana*. I studied there for -- I do my Bachelor Degree in History -- History/Political Science, and a minor in Economics.

JS: And what kinds of -- what sense of validation did you feel from that? You got your Bachelor's in Puerto Rico. Where did you anticipate it leading you? What were your plans once you finished studying?

JT: Well, let's do the whole story of college completely. When I started in college, I started in chemistry. Because I want to be a pharmacist. (laughs) Why, honestly, I decide

to that, I don't even remember why. But, in my [00:39:00] second semester in college -- my first year, second semester -- I took an elective class in political science. Honestly, at that point, I don't even know that you can study political science. I always liked to talk about politics and talk about social issues, but I never knew that you can study that. I said, "Oh wow, that is something new for me." And then, I changed my major in my next -- in my second year, as a sophomore, to Political Science. Then, when I was doing the political science thing, I decide also to add the history, because I've always been passionate about history. And that's why I ending with a double major in History and Political Science, with a minor in Economics.

JS: And so, what was that college experience like for you? Did you enjoy it? [00:40:00] Was it challenging?

JT: Well, to be honest with you, my main goal when I was doing my undergrad school was go to grad school and be a college professor. That was always my goal, in terms of realization of my professional career. When I finished my bachelor's degree, I went to grad school, I started a Master in History of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, at the Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, a beautiful building in the old San Juan. But (laughs) I

take a decision that wasn't the best one. I realized after that. I was working, at that time, as an assistant manager for a bookstore. And they offered me to be the manager of the store and be the -- [00:41:00] I don't know, I don't like to use the term bookseller, because it sounds like you just sell books. I prefer the term in Spanish, *librero*. Being the *librero* of the bookstore. And then I was talking with my -- at that time I already was married, and I was talking with my wife, "Oh, they offered to me this opportunity to make more money." And yeah, it was more money, but also there was more commitment. Yeah, you have to be more longer hours in the store, and things like that. And that have a conflict with my school schedule, and my wife told me not to do it. And I did anyway (laughs) "Don't worry, I'll come back next year." And "next year" turned into -- I was able to go back to school again twenty-five years after that. Try to go back to grad school, but unfortunately that time passed, and [00:42:00] family commitments were stronger, and I wasn't able to come back. But if I never make that mistake of changing, I probably would be a college professor. (laughs)

JS: When did you meet your wife? How did you guys meet?

JT: Well, we meet in college. We don't go to the same college, she went to the University of Puerto Rico, and I was in Río

Piedras. But we live in the same building. Both of us live off campus, and I was her neighbor in the building. And that's how I met her.

JS: So, you were studying at two different colleges. What were her majors? What was she interested in?

JT: She was in history and modern languages. We had a common thing in terms of history. I also take advantage of -- [00:43:02] she taking classes early in the morning with a Professor Gervasio García, that I admire him. I read some of his books and he was a brilliant guy. So, "Are you taking classes with Gervasio?" She goes, "Yes." "I'm going to class with you." (laughs) And that was a motivation for her, because she's not an early person like me. And I used to sit down in the hall in front of the classroom to listen to the class. And one day the professor came, I was early sitting down there, and he actually, "Why are you sitting there all the time?" I explained I came with my wife, and things like that, and I was brave enough to ask him, "Can I sit down inside the classroom and take the class? I don't study here; I study in another university." And he told me -- I don't know how you said that in English -- *masochista* -- [00:44:00] a person that likes to be hurt. I don't know the word right now. And I laugh and said, "Well no, but I like your

classes." So, he said, "OK you can come." And I take three classes with him in that way. I was saying to my wife that I push her to wake up early in the morning.

(laughs)

JS: And so, after you both finished school -- I know you said you were going to consider a Masters, but then you became a *librero*, but where did you guys go from there? Did you enjoy that career in Puerto Rico? What made you move?

JT: Well, I believe my time as a *librero* had been my most rewarded job that I ever had. I was -- I basically worked in two bookstores in Puerto Rico that [00:45:00] have well-renown at that time. The first one was Hermes, that was in a tourist area of El Condado, a very nice small bookshop -- bookstore with a café. It was two stories, very big in literature and art. And I was able to meet so many extraordinary people when I was working as the *librero*. At that time, the presentation of books was very big. A lot of writers -- international writers go there when they visit Puerto Rico and do the presentations there. I was lucky enough to meet a person that later on was awarded with a Nobel Prize -- Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian writer. [00:46:00] He also signed me a book, but unfortunately, I lost the book. (laughs) Yeah, I met [Diego Selonoso?], another Chilean writer; Alfredo Bryce

Echenique, another Peruvian. The cream of the cream of the Puerto Rican writers Luis Rafael Sánchez and Ana Lydia Vega. All those individuals, they go to that bookstore. I met so many interesting guys. I met a guy that even I follow him now on Spotify, because he's a musician. At that time, I knew that he -- in one conversation with him, that he used to be a member of the Beach Boys. (laughs) He played the keyboard. And I said, "Wow, yeah." He said, "Yeah, I played with them for eight years. And now I'm coming back to Puerto Rico, because I want to establish again in Puerto Rico." And he continued the music, he also have -- I believe he have a restaurant in Puerto Rico and he play there. But [00:47:00] he record a few albums and I follow him on Spotify. But he and other individuals that are amazing people that do theatre, compose -- and also ordinary people from the neighborhood. That's the good thing. People that you would never thought that they're passionate about reading -- that you always had the misconception that the readers are the people with big education. No, no, no, there are all kinds of individuals that love to read. You have great conversations with them. One of my best experience in bookstore was one day that there was this family, I think it was mom and dad and three or four kids. And they was talking, and I can't get what

language they're speaking. I don't know French; I don't know Italian -- Italy. But when you listen for a while you can [00:48:00] figure out, "Oh, they're speaking French or they're speaking Italian." I know a little bit of English, Spanish, yeah. But I can't get what they're talking about. "What language they're speaking?" And when they get close to me, I interrupt them, "Excuse me sir, sorry to bother you, what language are you speaking?" And he told me, "We speak Papiamentu." "You what?" "Papiamentu." "What is Papiamentu?" Well, Papiamentu is a native language from Aruba. And he explained to me that in Aruba, they speak five languages. They speak English, they speak Spanish, they speak Dutch, they speak French, and they speak Papiamentu. (laughs) I say, "Oh my God." And that was one of my nicest stories I ever have in my life, because I discover something that -- "Oh my God, that is unbelievable." And [00:49:00] the guy keep -- I think he was for a little while in Puerto Rico, but eventually I stopped seeing them. Maybe he was on vacation or working in Puerto Rico for a period of time, I don't know. And that was good. And I met people from different countries -- they was in Puerto Rico and they stop at the bookstore. People from Australia, from Spain, from France, from many places -- from Argentina. That's why I said that was the

biggest place that I enjoyed to work. Because it was so dynamic all the time. Every single day was like an adventure. And I don't know, I never asked this question to any *librero* before, but for me the most rewarded moment in a bookstore is when you open a box of books. When you receive the books and you open it, it's "Oh my God, this is the treasure. Woo!" [00:50:02] But it was a great time and like I said, only in that one. In the other one that I ending working before move to the United States was Casa Papel, I was a partner in the bookstore. I worked as *el librero*, and then Father and Son was the other two partners in the bookstore. That was a very nice one that was in the second floor, in the Old San Juan, with a balcony facing the bay. That was beautiful place.

JS: So, during this time while you're working as a *librero*, did you -- were you starting a family already at this time?

JT: Yeah, we started. We don't have kids right away, we -- I think it was already five years into our marriage when we have our first kid. Our oldest daughter. But yes, at that time, when I working at Casa Papel, we already had [00:51:00] our two oldest kids.

JS: And so, how long did you stay in Puerto Rico before you moved to the mainland?

JT: Well, I moved to the United States when I was already thirty-two. Thirty-two years old, yeah. I can't hear you.

JS: When you moved to the United States -- well, you already part of the United States, but when you moved to the mainland, did you immediately move to the Bethlehem area, or did you -- were you in other parts of the United States?

JT: No, I moved straight to Bethlehem. That's been the only place for the last twenty-six years that I live -- in Bethlehem.

JS: And why Bethlehem? Why of all the places?

JT: Because I have my oldest brother live in this area for a long time. Actually, [00:52:00] I was in the area in 1989. I came to visit him -- both of them -- two of my brothers lived in Easton at that time. And that was the first time I came to this area. I remember when they drive me by the former Bethlehem Steel, I said, "Stop, stop the car!" "What happened?" I go, "What is this?" Because it was so massive when you see the Bethlehem Steel. He says, "Oh, that is steel company." "Oh my God, this is a city inside a city." Yes, it is huge. That was my first impression when I see the Bethlehem Steel. Yeah, I moved because my older brother, he already lived in Bethlehem. At that time, he moved from Easton to Bethlehem. And I love my country, I love Puerto Rico, but Puerto Rico has a lot of

social problems. And when you have kids already, you start thinking about your kids more than yourself. [00:53:00]

And my wife and I wasn't really too happy in terms of growing up our kids in that type of environment that happened in Puerto Rico. And eventually, after a long time that you see nothing really change, you get a little tired of battle the same battles all the time, and you don't see any change at all. And then, one day I was talking with my brother, and he said, "Javier, I hear that you look a little sad in your voice." And I explain to him, "Yes, Albert, I don't know, I'm thinking of moving out of Puerto Rico probably. I don't know if I'm going to do it right away, or in a few years." And I start talking to him about Bethlehem. He said, "I live here in Bethlehem for a few years, it's a quiet town, but you'd probably like it. If you don't like it, well then you move another place. And you can stay at my home in the beginning while you settle." I go, "All right." [00:54:00] I talk with my wife and we decided right away, yeah go. I came first to my brother's house, and then like a month after I bring my wife with my two oldest kids. The little one born here in United States. And honestly, it was a big difference. (laughs) I know from San Juan, my wife -- know someone from San Juan, that is our capital -- and San Juan is a twenty-four-hour

city. It's like New York, D.C., any big city here. And Bethlehem is not. (laughs) Bethlehem wasn't at all a twenty-four-hour city. At least at that time. Now it's more -- you find more places to go late at night. But at that time, no. It was very different. And Sundays, nothing open -- Saturdays usually they open to noon probably. And [00:55:00] definitely, yeah, it was a big change. We remember when we don't have kids in Puerto Rico and we go out on the weekends and have some fun. We stop at two in the morning at the grocery store to do grocery shopping, and then go back home. Here you can't do that. (laughs) At least at that time, there's no way that you can do that. It was a very quiet place.

JS: So, it was a bit of a culture change it sounds like.

JT: Oh yeah.

JS: And so, what were some of the differences you noticed, too? I mean, you said you had two children in Puerto Rico, correct?

JT: Yes.

JS: And then, you said you had your youngest here. So, you had come to visit in 1989, and when did you have the move? The big move here?

JT: I moved in '90 -- hold on -- '94. Yeah, in '94. I move, [00:56:00] like I said, before my family came. But the

rest of my family moved the day of the birthday of my son. May 21st. And he was turning two at that time. We have already twenty-six years here. But even that was a big change, the moving. Something very funny happened. The next day, or the next two days after my family arrived, we decide to go through a walk through of South Bethlehem. We was walking on 4th Street, my wife starts saying "hi" to people. That's okay, she's a friendly person. It's not a problem. But she do it too often. I say, "Why you say hi to so many people?" She said, "Javier, I know that people." "How do you mean, you know them?" "Yes, that person I say hi first, [00:57:00] she went to school with me. That other person is a friend of my brother." And then we find out that Bethlehem was like the biggest neighborhood of Patillas. (laughs) My wife was born in Patillas. There's so many people from Patillas here. For her, she know more people than me, but I was already a month here, before her. And that was a funny thing. Said, "OK." Now we find out that -- and that wasn't the reason -- that reason why we move. We move because my brother told me, "I live here, move here." But we don't have a clue so many people from her hometown, Patillas, live here in Bethlehem.

JS: So, the longer you stayed, did you find out why so many people from Patillas, or from Puerto Rico, decided to be in Bethlehem? Was there a certain reason?

JT: Yeah, the main reason that people from Patillas and Corozal -- that was the very first two [00:58:00] towns that brought people -- not everybody from there, but the biggest chunk of people from Puerto Rico that came. They came to work at the Steel -- at the Bethlehem Steel. That was the main reason. And then they start bringing friends and brothers and yeah.

JS: So, even in the '90s, you saw a lot of people come from Puerto Rico to work at Bethlehem Steel, then?

JT: Well, at that time, it was the last years of the Steel. I don't believe they came to work at the Steel. They was previously here because of the Steel. Because if I'm not mistaking, the Steel closed in '95. If I'm not wrong with that -- I'm not very good on dates. Yeah, but I believe they close in the '95. But definitely, if you look at the history of the migration from Puerto Rico to Bethlehem, that was definitely the Steel, the main reason that they moved in the '40s, '50s, [00:59:00] '60s. When the Steel was the big economic engine.

JS: And so, with you and your wife living in Bethlehem with your family, what attracted to Bethlehem? What attracted

you -- were there work opportunities you saw? What were the good things that you saw around here?

JT: I think what make me stay in Bethlehem was the history of the city. When I started learning how Bethlehem was founded, and all the different changes that happened in Bethlehem. The story of the Steel was a very powerful one -- because I love history. I think that was one of the things that keep me here. Also, the environment was very nice -- very small-town [01:00:00] environment that was very good to raise my kids. I like the schools; I start getting involved with the schools at that time. Because I was working at night, my wife working during the day, I had time in the day to get involved with school. And I started getting involved. I have to say the person responsible for that was Kim Carrell-Smith, the history professor at Lehigh University. That she was the one that trapped me in a meeting (laughs) at the Fountain Hill Elementary School. "How about you come over here? We have a meeting; I want you to be here." "OK." I don't have anything to do, the kids are already in school, I go back home. I say, "OK, I'm staying." And since there, I decide to get involved with the community, because I also start meeting very nice people in [01:01:00] the community that had the same issues

that we have. Working with little kids, all of us. New parents. And that was a great experience.

JS: And so, during this time, you mentioned you were working nights, correct?

JT: Yeah, at that time I was working -- well, second shift, from -- I believe I started from like five to one. That was a factory that I was working in. We was printing shirts. I think that's my only experience I ever work in factory -- manufacturing -- was printing those shirts. From there I jump into banking. I work in the bank with the former Meridian Bank. There was a little branch they have in front of Lehigh, where the -- what is the name of that café there? In front Lehigh?

JS: [01:02:00] Saxby's maybe?

JT: Yeah, Saxby's. They used to be there, the branch, and I started there. I work in banking for around five or six years. They changed the name every year. You never know for what bank you work. It started with Meridian, then they moved to Corestate, First Union, Wachovia. (laughs) You never knew which one you work.

JS: So, during this time, you're banking, but you're also really connected with the schools, and you're right by the university. So, I know originally you wanted to be a

professor. So, how did this all (laughs) -- how did this all make you feel? Did it make you feel divided?

JT: I always have that in my head -- go back to school. But once I knew how much expensive is Lehigh (laughs), I said, "I don't think so. My salary as a teller in a bank [01:03:00] would pay for Lehigh." (laughs) Eventually I went to Lehigh. I started in the American Study program, but I couldn't keep up. There was too much responsibility in the family, things like that. And I decide not to continue.

JS: And so, your kids are growing up, and they are surrounded by people that have been here a long time. They're surrounded by some Puerto Rican community. What was that like for you raising them, and having them have a Puerto Rican identity? Or what did that look like?

JT: Okay, yes, I remember when I mentioned to a friend that was a co-worker at the bookstore in Puerto Rico, that I'm going to move to United States. The first thing that he mentioned to me was -- he live in United States before -- [01:04:00] and he said to me, "Do not expect that your kids are going to be the same Puerto Rican that you are. They're going to be Puerto Ricans, but they're going to be a different kind of Puerto Rican." And he don't say that in bad way, he was making the expectations to me "Don't try to

make them as we are here, because their experiences there is going to be very different. They're going to be Puerto Ricans, but they're going to be different than you." And I came down with that in my head. I let them grow knowing that they're Puerto Ricans -- my wife and I worked very hard to explain to them where we come from, who we are, what is our history, what is our culture. But openly allowed [01:05:00] them to be themselves. To be the people that they are. We have to recognize from the beginning that their main language is not going to be Spanish, it's going to be English. We probably don't work too hard in terms of making them speak better Spanish (laughs) than the one that they speak now, because we understand English, they speak back to us in English. We talk to them in Spanish and they answer back in English. And that was okay. I think that the most important thing is -- okay, it's good to know your language and understand it, but it's better to be a better person. We work hard to make them good people. And they -- we put our values in there, we teach [01:06:00] them as much as we can, but of course you are smart enough to decide what you want to be in your life.

JS: So, it sounds like you have a lot of confidence in their abilities to become who they're meant to be. Was there

anything that you did want to pass on to them? Did you and your wife share a faith, or did you share some beliefs that maybe you considered were maybe non-negotiable? Or things that you did want to pass down?

JT: I don't use the term probably "non-negotiable," but we tried to create expectation of them to understand who they are, and from where your family come from. And develop yourself in the best way that you understand you can be. It's nothing wrong to be Puerto Rican, define yourself as Puerto Rican, and do not speak the language. There's nothing wrong with that. I don't [01:07:00] see anything wrong with that. Because there are many, many, many in the United States that are that way. And it's nobody's fault, it's the way it is. You live in a country that the main language is English, and you have very little exposure to Spanish, what are you going to do? But you have to recognize who you are as a person, that's the important part. Who you are. And that's what the expectation that we always tried to create of them. And I think we accomplished that. (laughs)

JS: And so, as they're growing up, and you're becoming more involved with the schools, where did that all lead you? I know eventually you became involved with the Steel Workers Archives, right?

JT: Well, yeah, I was -- the passion for [01:08:00] community kept growing and growing and growing. And one day I was -- I wasn't really looking for a job, but you always have the tendency -- well, we don't use newspapers anymore -- but in the newspaper they have a section of classifieds, that they have all the things, jobs, and stuff like that. And one day I was, "Ah, let me check what is here in the jobs." And I found a very little ad -- maybe a few words, a few sentences, not really that big -- that they said, "You like -- you live in South Bethlehem, you are bilingual, and you love the community, apply." (laughs) I live in South Bethlehem, I am bilingual, I love my community, let's apply! And I called the number, and it was a position for the former South Bethlehem Neighborhood Center. They was [01:09:00] looking to expand the position for outreach to target the Latino community. The South Bethlehem Neighborhood Center was a very old non-profit -- small non-profit in South Bethlehem. At that time, it was already forty years old. And then I applied. When I get to the interview, oh my God, I was panicking because when I get into the room, three of the four individuals that want to interview me, I know them. (laughs) When you go to an interview and people don't know you, the expectation is whatever you tell me, this is who you are. But when you

have three out of the four that know you, you say, "Oh my God. How am I going to answer these questions now?"

(laughs) And then I was interviewed, and after [01:10:00] a week or so, they call me, they offer to me the position. And that's how I really engaged full-time with the community. At the beginning it was all in my spare time with the school, things like that. But that opportunity with the South Bethlehem Neighborhood Center was life-changing for me. It was unbelievable. All the people that are needing my connection with the community, the needs of the community, was oh my God. Was unbelievable honestly. I really enjoyed my time at the South Bethlehem Neighborhood Center -- and also my other jobs related to the community, I always enjoy them. And yes, at that time, I was a little bit involved with the Steel Workers Archive. And they're trying to reach out to the [01:11:00] Hispanic former staff members, or employees, of the Bethlehem Steel. And I was trying to be that liaison between the archive and the Hispanic community.

JS: So, did you consider yourself -- I mean, some might, I would -- did you consider yourself an advocate for the Hispanic community, an activist, a change-maker? How would you define your role during that time?

JT: Well, yeah, definitely yeah. Many members of our community even, are very bright individuals. They're a little shy to get involved, because the cultural barrier. Sometimes could be the language, sometimes could be the way that people behave. You try keep being in an area you're more comfortable. I don't have that problem. [01:12:00] I speak with anyone; I go to everywhere. I don't have any problem with that. But many people have those particular problems. They say that they don't want to engage in that because "I don't know, I don't feel comfortable talking with them. I don't know, I make a joke and they don't laugh." I say, "That's okay, but that's part of things." And with the Neighborhood Center, that they allow me to get involved with the community directly, yes, I be an advocate for the community at large. I be honest with you. Yes, I want to help my community better than anyone. But I don't have any problem with anyone. As far as for the benefit of the community, I'm there.

JS: Did you find yourself often having -- being called on in political ways to represent the community, or to fight for a certain thing? Were there certain issues that came to the forefront during your time?

JT: Yes, I had [01:13:00] community organizer training -- I was trained as a community organizer. And that was part of my

responsibilities at the Neighborhood Center. Organize the community in different issues that they have. We talked with the police about issues with the policing. The community don't feel safe because sometimes the police they are too aggressive to them, or they speak too loud to them, and they don't feel comfortable with that. We also get involved with issues with picking up the trash, or issues with violence in the community. I think the biggest battle that we had, ending as a win for the community -- even that they have a lot of items -- I think that it's when they decide to build a new Broughal Middle School. [01:14:00] That was an effort of many people, that wasn't me only, no. Kim Carrell-Smith was very involved in that, Anne Evans was very involved with that, Megan Evans -- the daughter of Anne -- also was very involved with that. Who else? It was a big group of people, apologies if I miss any name. At that time, the school district decide to rebuild the school. It was a very old middle school -- a building that was built by a very renowned architecture, we have to acknowledge that. [Harper Lee?], I think his name is. [Harper Lee?] Yeah, I believe so. And there was a deal already on the table, and more or less closed, between Lehigh and the school district -- Lehigh University and the Bethlehem Area School District. [01:15:00] When they

decide Lehigh to give some land that they have -- you know the Iacocca building? Over the mountain? In that area. They want to swap that land for Broughal's land, and build the school on the top of the mountain. Oh, come on, you can't do that. (laughs) How are you going to build a school up there? How are the kids going to get there? If something happened -- bad weather or an emergency happened, and the parents don't have a car to go there, how are they going to be there? Honestly. And then the deal also involved one or two million dollars that the school district's going to receive from Lehigh. And Lehigh was going to take that piece of land. But we started talking with the community about this, "OK what [01:16:00] do you think about that?" But the community -- the vast majority said "That is crazy, how are they going to do that?" And then we start having those conversation and battles with the school district. We started bringing parents to the school board meetings, and we fill the place of people that are against that craziness of building over there. We also have parents talking in Spanish with a translator to the member of the school board. And then the deal went off. No deal. But then, the battles move into rehab the old building, or tear down the old building, and build a new one. Then the battle was now between us -- between the

members of the community on what we want. Honestly, I study history, I understand very well what is preservation. But my point of view in terms [01:17:00] of preserve a building is if the building do not fulfill any need for the community, I don't have any problem with the building disappear. And I say that, I say it out loud in the community, some people don't like what I said. But at that time, I was working as a community organizer, and I had to do what the community told me. I can't express my own opinion, "OK, this is what you have to do." A member of the community that I'm working with, they was telling me, almost all of them, "We want a new school. We don't want to rebuild the old school." And in that debate, the new school won. They tore down the old school. Like I said, a building built by a very renowned architecture that had their historical value, but the community [01:18:00] wants something different. The majority -- there was members of the community that wanted to keep the old building and rehab it. But the majority won and it won. And then, we decide to move forward with that plan. And Megan Evans and myself was part of the committee that designed the school. We participate in the meetings -- that was very good, because at least they have a member of the community in the decision making. What building is going to be built there

and what kind of building that we want. And the nice thing that was -- well, probably they're not given that use right now -- but the main reason that design that we select, because that new school had three focus points that the community can have access without the need to enter into the school. There is the theatre, the health center, [01:19:00] and the gym. The three of them have access from the outside, and nobody has to go into the building in order to be able to use those services. That was one of the main reasons.

JS: And so, what were the years that all of this was taking place between Lehigh and that, and then the shift to the new Broughal?

JT: Oh my God, I can't remember exactly. I think, it had to be at least not less than ten years ago. More probably. Because my younger daughter -- now she's twenty-four. She was the first eighth grader of the new school. (laughs) She was in the new school only one year. I probably would -- it probably would be in the [01:20:00] beginning of the 2000s, probably, when that started. I can be wrong. Like I said, I'm not very good on dates -- remember dates and stuff like that. But it was a great experience, a great community get together -- for the good or the bad, the community was there discussing something for our community.

JS: Wonderful. Did you feel your identity -- I mean, you were hired specifically for who you were, for being bilingual, for being an advocate. So, in what ways have you felt, perhaps not welcome in your time in Bethlehem? Or perhaps rejected in some ways in terms of career, or in terms of personal --?

JT: I don't feel that I was not welcome. Because if I don't speak, you'll probably think that [01:21:00] I'm not Puerto Rican. And that's something that I've been dealing with since I live in Puerto Rico. Because even there, when I try to get a taxicab or something like that, the driver start talking to me in English. "I'm from here, don't speak English." (laughs) And here, I still looking for the answer of that. Many people told me, "You don't look like a Puerto Rican." And I'm still waiting for the answer how the Puerto Rican's supposed to look like. (Laughs) Explain to me that, because I don't know. I never find that answer. I feel a little bit of discrimination probably when I talk. Yeah, I have an accent, of course I have an accent. This is not my main language. But you feel it in some conversation with some people. [01:22:00] You say something, they don't pay attention to you, and three minutes later other person say the same thing as you, in a non-accent language, and "That's the greatest idea I ever

heard." (laughs) And you laugh because you've experienced that already. Yeah, and I understand that. It's okay, I don't have any kind of problem with that in that kind of individuals. As far as you don't offend me directly, or try to do something to me, I don't have a problem. It's just intellectually talking, all right. It's your problem, not my problem. I don't have any problem with that, if somebody speak different than me. And I know my idea, that you are now saying is the greatest one, was mine. That's probably that person hear my idea before, and now he's saying [01:23:00] it.

JS: What career opportunities, or what are the big economic or academic opportunities that you've seen for Puerto Rican people, for Hispanic people, in Bethlehem over the years?

JT: I think they have all the biggest opportunities available. Everything is available, it's just you have to put yourself into -- yeah, I don't understand what is your responsibility as a member of the community? You have to understand that in this country, United States, you're going to live with neighbors that they're not the same as you. Very different than you, because they came with a different country, they speak a very different language. Even the Hispanic ones. We are not the same. I'm from Puerto Rico, I do not behave the same way that a Colombian

person behave, or a Peruvian person behave. Yeah,
[01:24:00] we maybe speak the same language -- or more or
less the same language -- all depends where those
individuals came from their country, because their main
language -- their native language, they're probably going
to speak English or Spanish very different than me. But
that's something that you have to understand as a human
being. You live in a world that nobody's equal -- not
equal -- is not the same. Not everybody's the same, and
you have to understand and respect that. And learn from
that. See that as an advantage for you to learn something
different.

JS: Have you felt, from the outside -- so, people that are
non-Hispanic, non-Latino -- do you feel often times that
you are grouped together with people from other cultures
without even being thought of as specifically identifying
as Puerto Rican? Or is there discomfort with that, with
community members [01:25:00] that are predominantly
European, and assuming that you are just quote/unquote
"Spanish?" Is there a discomfort with that?

JT: Well, my experience with the vast majority of the people
that I know here in Bethlehem, that are not Hispanic
descendants, have been very good so far. Yeah, I have
relationships with different levels in government and

academics, people from the street -- normal people. And I don't have any problem with that. Yes, you always found -- there was an experience that I had -- I don't know if you trying to omitting the name, people may know what happened. I was a member of an historical organization, and I was trying to introduce the Hispanic experience in the narrative of the organization. [01:26:01] And there was a big resistance. There was a big resistance of those so-called "very old members of the community," because the narrative of this organization is mostly for the people that came from Eastern Europe. So, okay, I'm sorry, but I don't believe that, because the history continues. The history don't stop, and you want to tell the history of the sector of the city, yeah you have to include everybody. Maybe at the beginning that wasn't that important, because they just start coming here. But when you keep adding years -- we are talking about we are here for probably eighty years already, or ninety years already. And you have to take that into consideration that we are part of the history and the culture of the city.

JS: [01:27:00] So, how do the contributions of the Puerto Rican people here, the Hispanic people here -- how does that echo into the national level? So, what happens in Bethlehem? What have you seen, what connections have you seen occur at

the local, but you can see it maybe going into a national level?

JT: I'm going to answer that question as a Puerto Rican. I can't answer that question for the Mexicans or any other country in Latin America. What happened here in Bethlehem is very similar of what happened in other communities in the United States, related to the Puerto Rican communities. What is different is the access to make them visible. Because one of the things that I start learning more and more when I move here [01:28:00] is the history of the Puerto Ricans in United States. And normally -- there's nothing wrong with that -- normally, the history of the Puerto Ricans in the big cities -- let's say New York, part of Connecticut probably, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago -- the traditional centers where we can move when started the big wave of Puerto Ricans in the last century move. They are very well-explained sometimes, or very well-known by other people. But not the history of the Puerto Ricans in small cities. For example, in Bethlehem, we started moving here in the '40s, as a big wave of Puerto Ricans coming here. And we established our own institutions, we create our own things, the same way that any group [01:29:00] do it in different states, and different big cities in the United States. The difference is the exposure that they

have. They have more resources to expose that. They are probably more than us, of course -- it's not the same thing when you have a million Puerto Ricans in a place than when you have 30,000. (Laughs) It's a very big difference, no? But you study the history and the development of the communities, are very similar. We established our own schools, we established our own places to go to pray God, or we have our own places to socialize. Everybody do the same thing. And I think the big difference is the exposure of that. Because, here in Bethlehem, we can talk of institutions that have more than fifty years old, created by Puerto Ricans. We have the Puerto Rican Beneficial Society -- commonly known as the [01:30:00] Puerto Rican Club. We have the Hispanic Center that used to be named the Council for Spanish Speaking of the Lehigh Valley -- until the name was changed. We also published a newspaper at the end of the '60s, beginning of the '70s. We have our own places to do mass. We create those institutions and exist there. But they don't have the recognition because our community is smaller, and they don't have that exposure. But not that long ago, maybe five, six years ago, I see -- I believe it was in the newspaper, I don't remember exactly where -- of an exhibition that was presented in a community college -- I think it's Jork

Community College, or something like that? Or George College? I don't know -- an exhibition about the [01:31:00] Mennonite Puerto Ricans. (laughs) Yeah, I know there's a Mennonite community in Puerto Rico, but I never knew that there also was Puerto Ricans in the Mennonite community in Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, when I was able to get the information, when I called to go to see the exhibition, they said, "We just closed last week, the exhibition." (Laughs) I get information too late. Yeah, because those are the types of things that also you have say. It's not only the struggles of our communities in the big industrial cities, but there are other stories and other struggles that have to be said in the smaller places. I believe the history of Bethlehem is fabulous. You talk about the Hispanics here, the Puerto Ricans here. But how many people really [01:32:00] know? I think that that's why this project is so important, because we have to tell the story. And tell the story from the people that really made that story. You have to talk with the people that was there at that time. Unfortunately, many of them are already gone, but we still have some that we have to catch those ones, and make those stories heard.

JS: Thank you. I think you ended this really well. But it doesn't have to be the end. We have about ten minutes.

Are there any other stories you want to share? Anything else that comes to mind while you're thinking about all these events that have taken place? Anything important that you want to add to this?

JT: Well, I don't know, I think I said almost everything.

[01:33:00] From my perspective, a person that I still consider myself a newcomer, even that I live twenty-six years already here. There are families here -- and I'm talking here about Puerto Rican families -- that are here from since the '40s. We need to hear those individuals. I think that's the main thing that we have to do. And also, we have to make ownership of what we have here. We own, also, the city. The city is not just for a group of people before everybody. And we have to be part of that. We have to do our best effort to be part of the city.

JS: Thank you. Are there any photos or documents or artifacts that perhaps you think would be a good contribution to this project?

JT: [01:34:01] From me?

JS: Yeah.

JT: I'm very bad in terms of photos and stuff. (Laughs) I even don't use my phone to take pictures sometimes. Honestly, I don't think so that I personally have anything. But there have to be, definitely, a lot of photos and memorabilia in

the community. That at some point -- if not collected, because they are very personal, but at least making available to make a photo or digitalize them, and preserve it. Because it's very hard for some families -- take the picture of my grandfather or my great-grandfather and give it to you. No, keep it as yours, allow us to make a copy and preserve it.

JS: And I know you are also working on this project with me, but is there anybody else that you think [01:35:00] that we should absolutely interview for this in addition to --?

JT: Yeah, I mentioned to you a couple of people that I already tried to reach them. I gave you Guillermo Lopez, Jose Rosado I think is very important, Iris Cintron is definitely the most that we have to talk to her. But also, I was thinking recently about the incorporation of another type of generation of Puerto Ricans. Younger generation. Maybe they are second generation or third generation, but their experience have to be told. I'm talking about people that are in their late-20s, early-30s, something like that. I have a lady in mind, used to be my coworker, and now she works with the Hispanic Center -- it's Delia Marrero. I think Delia would be a good addition, because Delia is born and raised here, but she's very Puerto Rican, [01:36:00] and she's very proud of that. And is a very spry woman,

also, that we need to have her in those conversations. I'm going to try to reach her very soon, to see if she's available for this.

JS: Wonderful. Is there anything else you're thinking of before we end our interview? This was really wonderful. I really enjoyed (inaudible) everything.

JT: Well, like you said, this is not the end. This is just the beginning of something bigger that can happen here. And it's not only about the Puerto Ricans, there are other groups that we have to do the same thing with them. Allow them to tell their story. That is extremely important.

JS: Okay, well thank you so much for everything.

JT: No, thank you.

JS: For sharing your story, for giving us -- you kept saying that you didn't know the dates for certain things, but I find -- [01:37:00] I mean, it was so descript -- everything you mentioned was so descript and so wonderful. I'm not from Bethlehem, so it was really good to hear everything you described -- especially with Utuado. Because I have not personally been there. That's one of the parts of Puerto Rico I have not been to yet.

JT: But I don't want to miss the opportunity to thank you for also to involve with this project. Because, honestly, without you, this is not happening.

JS: Well, thank you. Thank you for collaborating, thank you for being so inspiring. And we'll continue to tell stories together, then.

JT: All right.

JS: Okay.

JT: I'm on board with that.

JS: All right, thank you so much, Javier. We'll talk soon.

JT: Okay, thank you.

JS: Okay, take care. Bye.

JT: Bye.

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