

Olga Negrón

JANINE SANTORO: So, my name is Janine Santoro, and I'm here with Olga Negrón to talk about her life and experiences as a community leader in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as a part of the Latinx Oral History Project. Our project has funding from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium, and we are meeting on Zoom on June 17, 2020. So thank you so much, Olga, for your willingness to speak to us today. And, to start, can you please state your full name and spell it for me?

OLGA NEGRÓN: Olga Negrón, O-L-G-A N-E-G-R-O-N.

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

ON: It's February 6, 1967.

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

ON: Yes, I do. [00:05:00]

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

ON: Yes, I do.

JS: Wonderful. Do you consent to having The Latinx Archive using your interview for educational purposes in other

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

ON: Absolutely.

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

ON: I do.

JS: Okay. Wonderful. Well, Olga, thank you, thank you, thank you for meeting with us.

ON: Absolutely, my honor.

JS: And so let's start where all good stories start, at the beginning. Can you tell me about the earliest years of your life that you remember? Some of the years of your childhood that you consider important in your identity and who you are.

ON: Absolutely. I am a proud Puerto Rican. [00:06:00] I was born and raised in Puerto Rico, Naranjito Puerto Rico, in the mountains. I'm the daughter of a man and a woman that are still alive and together, into a family of 11, eight girls and three boys. And, as our Latino culture goes, I am number ten. However, I am considered to be the youngest because after me is my youngest brother. But, because he's

a man, he had to take care of me. So, since we were small, he was always in charge of me, sent with me to school parties or activities. Because he was the man and had to watch for his sister. So I'm considered -- I grew up with the feeling that I was the youngest one in the family.

[00:07:00] I feel that, to me, that's the privilege being born and raised in Puerto Rico, because I had an incredible, beautiful childhood. The reason why I am today so resilient and have been able to be capable of dealing with so many tough situations that I lived with. So I grew up seeing people around me that looked like me.

Everywhere, the mayor, the governor, the teachers, the doctors, the lawyers, everybody all around me looked like me and spoke my language. So, to me, that definitely gave me, again, the resilience and the privilege of making me the woman who I am today. It did also, as I moved to the states later, [00:08:00] turn into a huge culture shock, and created new situations for me. However, the fact that, again, I was born into this beautiful family with so much love around me, and that really made me the resilient woman I am today. Definitely.

JS: Can you talk about some of your relationships within your family? I know you mentioned your brother was the man and

responsible for protecting you, as it is in a lot of Latino cultures. So what was that like for you? Did you find that to be empowering to be able to have someone stand up for you and on your side, or did you feel at times maybe it was suffocating? Or what was it like growing up as a young girl in Puerto Rico?

ON: Well, I do remember as a teenager being annoyed by the fact that I was only allowed [00:09:00] to go to school activities if my brother was with me. But, especially today, I realize the importance that that relationship had. My brother and I have an incredible relationship still today, and I think that created that feeling that I'd been taken care of, that feeling of security and love. And that goes, not just for my brother, but with all my brothers and sisters. I think that also, we all talk about being a parent and how come there was not a book, right, with all the rules and the dos and the don'ts or whatever. You have a child and then you try to figure out what to do next. But, with me, it's funny. I always say that, by the time I was born, my mom and dad already had to figure it out. They dealt with ten or nine. So I understand also that their relationship included [00:10:00] my older brothers and sisters, and my parents, and me, is still today very

different. And we grew up with that, and still today, sometimes we hang out, my brothers and sisters, and they say, "You always got away with everything you wanted." Because, by that time, it was my turn. I did stuff, and they're like, "Oh, yeah. No, she's okay. She will get up, she will move." It was not a big deal as it was when my oldest brothers and sisters were growing up. All the way to even going to college, I remember when I was in twelfth grade, I actually did high school at the same time that I went to a vo-tech, sewing for industrial sewing. I'm a seamstress by training, by trade. I worked as a seamstress for many years, and that's not in my résumé. And not everybody knows about that part of my life, but it's there. [00:11:00] And I remember I won a contest sewing, and then at my high school, and then regional. And then we were competing among the island, so there were individuals for all over the island -- high schoolers like me -- competing. And, in the competition, we had three hours to put together a skirt. And I put it together in 45 minutes. And so it was like, "What?! How did you do that?" So I won, of course, but I was offered a job. I was offered a job right then and there by Fruit of the Loom. That company was in Puerto Rico, and I got a job offer. And I'm so excited. I

go to Papi, "Papi, Papi! I got a job offer." And he was like, "No. You're going to college." And I'm like, "But what am I going to go to college for? I got a job offer. [00:12:00] Isn't that the purpose of going to school and graduating?" "No. You're going to college." I think that, by the time I was that age, my dad was just clear that there's no way. And this comes from a man that finished third grade, third grade, because he had to go to work. And my mother that only finished fourth grade, because she had to go to work, as kids, as it was back in the day. So, some of my oldest siblings didn't go to college, they got jobs, they got married right away after high school. I have a brother, my oldest brother, he served the U.S. Army, and actually made that a career. I believe he served 23 years. And I have my second sister that also served the U.S. Army, I believe she did seven years. And, as I was watching them, I remember I was so proud. Watching them with the uniforms, representing the United States, representing Puerto Rico. And I wanted to be -- [00:13:00] "Well, then I want to be a soldier, too." And my dad was like, "No. I've got two kids in the army. You are not going, too. You're going to college." So that insistence that my dad put on me that I had no way around

it. "No army, and no army for you, no work for you. You better go to college." So I believe all of that really made a difference between who I am today, really. Shaped me up.

JS: And what kind of city was Naranjito? Was it very populated? Was it more urban or was it more rural?

ON: No, it's rural. It's a very small city in the middle of the mountains. It's south from San Juan about half an hour. [00:14:00] And it's wood, it's in mountains. We had a farm. At some point we had 200 chickens in the house. We always had goats and lots of pigs. My dad kept the tradition of roasting the pig, lechón asado. And so many times we had lots of pigs, and chickens, and guineas, and platanos everywhere, and mango trees, and banana trees, and plantain, and you name it. We just had to -- instead of trips to the supermarket, we just went to the back yard, and pulled whatever we needed from the yard. And I grew up watching my parents, and then later myself, planting stuff, growing stuff. It's a very small town, beautiful, beautiful town. I'm still **very** connected with many [00:15:00] **individuals** from my high school. It's a little traditional, faith-based, active community. A beautiful, beautiful town.

JS: So, as you father's talking about you going to college, it's very exciting, he's very supportive. So, at that time, who were the role models you were looking to? Who were the people who really shaped who you were, or who you wanted to be at that point?

ON: That's a very good question. I think that, in high school, I had so much fun. I had so much fun in high school, you have no idea. I always participated in the musical, in the theater production. I had an incredible theater teacher, Piolo, Mr. Hernandez. He was so cool. He was always work with us, and we had great teachers all through. [00:16:00] They were friends. I was the vice president of my class, so we did events, we raised money for that class night party, and the teachers were very involved with us. We worked together doing activities with theater. I remember in twelfth grade we did a show, a musical. And I went to public school. And I remember it was Emilio S. Belaval. It was a theater competition, musicals -- kind of like we have in here, the Freddys, that high schools are competing. So the Emilio S. Belaval contest was only for private schools. So only private high schools participated. And every year my theater teacher requested, "We want to participate, we want to participate." [00:17:00] And I

guess he was so insistent -- he also went to the University of Puerto Rico, he's a fighter -- we got accepted. So it was in my year, when I was in high school in the twelfth grade, that we for the first time were allowed as a public school to compete against all the other private schools.

We did *El retablo del flautista*, I will never forget that. And, because I was doing vocational sewing at that point, I was always sewing. And, by the age of 15, I designed and created my first wedding dress. When I was 15, I was doing my friends' quinceañera dresses, all the 16 dresses everybody was wearing. So, in high school, I was a pro. So he gave me the opportunity. He said, "Will you help me with the costumes?" I was so excited. I'm like, "Of course I want to do the costumes." And so he designed them, I didn't. But we worked it out together. [00:18:00] I cut them, I measured, I sewed. I have all my friends helping, doing some of the sewing. But I did the costumes for them, for theater. And, for the first time, here we go, we participated. And we pretty much won all the awards, including costumes. So, here I am, competing with private high schools, and we are competing for the first time, and I won the award. It was a beautiful experience, and I think that it really got me connected to another side

of sewing, another side of creating. And I do have a creative brain, so that was just extra vitamins for it. And that's how I ended up at the University of Puerto Rico, where my teacher, Piolo Hernandez, helped me connect with the costume shop at the theater. So I was accepted at the University of Puerto Rico drama department. [00:19:00] And I was just concentrated into costume, because that's what I wanted as a seamstress. And also I did some acting here and there. I had to do the acting classes and all that stuff but it was the costumes that I was really interested in. So my teacher, Piolo, connected me with the costume shop, and I got my first work study job at the costume shop. So it was amazing. Again, another opportunity, because the costume designer, Gloria Sáez -- I'll never forget her either -- she was from Spain. And she is a very talented woman. And she was doing all the costumes for the novelas in Puerto Rico, for all the soap operas, yes. And Bellas Artes. She was the costume designer for Bellas Artes. So guess what? [00:20:00] A puertorriqueña was sewing for the soap operas, telenovelas, in Puerto Rico. I met Raul Julia *que en paz descansa*, Raul Julia. I measured him, I did the costumes for him for *Hamlet* in Bellas Artes, and for a movie. My first movie was with Raul Julia, *La*

| *Gran Fiesta, that's the name of the movie,* and I did the costumes. Only because I was at the right place at the right time. [00:21:00] So I worked for a few years in Bellas Artes just sewing. Actually, when I met the father of my three daughters at the University of Puerto Rico drama department. He wanted to become an actor. So he was acting and I met him there. And we decided to get married, and we had to change our wedding day three times because I was working in a show, *Mujeres*, that was the name of the play, con Camille Carrión, Ángela Meyer, all of these actresses. It was *Mujeres*. And the production was so well received, that they had to keep on extending another weekend. It was Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And they keep on extending. "We're going to have to do it again next weekend." So I had to keep on changing my wedding day, because I was working at Bellas Artes. So I really had beautiful experiences as a young woman and through all my life. And it really shaped me up who I am today.

JS: So sounds like you were very supported by your community, by your family. You had a very productive and enriching time at the University of Puerto Rico. And then, from there, you said you met your husband there, right? Did you

stay there and start your family in Puerto Rico?

[00:22:00]

ON: Yes, my first daughter, Corazón, was born in Puerto Rico at Auxilio Mutuo in Río Piedras. But she was born in September, and that year my husband finished his bachelor's. I was not done yet. I was only halfway through when he was accepted at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. So something that I've never even thought of doing, living outside of Puerto Rico. Had to get to that point because, well, my husband was moving to go to school, and I was not going to stay back. So there I went, on an adventure moving to Tallahassee, Florida. I couldn't speak one word of English, other than, [00:23:00] "Hello. My name is Olga." He went to private school, and it was a military school. So he spoke English very well, because it was a bilingual school. And, in my case, I just had some basic English that I was taught back in the day in Puerto Rico. And my mother who is still alive -- her memory is no good no more -- but, until a few years ago, she still remembered that. She used to tell me, "Learn English. You have to do it. I was doing all A's, but always "B" in English." Because I didn't want to. I was just, "I don't want to learn English. I don't like it.

Why do I need English anyway? I'm in Puerto Rico." So I was very rebellious against the idea of learning another language. I didn't want to. And then, going to the University of Puerto Rico, that's in Río Piedras, if you know anything about that, [00:24:00] that was the creator of the Macheteros, and the independentistas. So the ambiance at the University of Puerto Rico was even stronger against the colonization, and against United States taking over Puerto Rico. And wanted to teach us about Santa Claus, and about the language. So my desire not to have anything to do with English of the United States of America got stronger when I was at the University of Puerto Rico. So I moved to Florida without being able to speak English, with a baby in my hands, and with my husband.

JS: So what experiences in Florida did you encounter that helped you grow, that helped you feel supported. It must have been very hard being with just your husband and your newborn, and being surrounded by a language you're not familiar with. [00:25:00] What gave you strength, what helped you grow, what gave you hope?

ON: It was a horrible experience. We were living in Tallahassee, Florida, which is the capital. Yet it's a very segregated city. It was at least back in the day.

Actually, I believe they just -- not too long ago -- they had a black mayor for the first time. But the problem, the hardest challenge, the biggest problem for us, for me to deal with was, it's a Sunday, we're going to the park, we walk into the park. And all the white people are sitting and hanging out over here, and all the black people are sitting and hanging out over there. There were no Latinos. And we're like, "Where do we go?" There was no space for us. And it was even worse if we will go to the store, or we were outside talking between us, [00:26:00] or with others, the few Latinos that we found there. People would be looking at us strange, like, "What language are you speaking?" They didn't know, they didn't recognize Spanish. It was bad. I was made fun of. I remember our second daughter was born in Tallahassee, Isis. And I remember being pregnant with Isis, and I really was craving shrimp. And there was a Long John Silver very close to our house. And I remember telling my husband, "I want shrimp." And he was always trying, and pushing me to be alone and do things by myself, because otherwise I would be depending on him. Like, "What does this say? What does this say? What do they mean? I don't understand." So he kept on pushing me like, "No, you go by yourself. You go to the doctor.

You go to this restaurant by yourself." So, even though I didn't like it and I was mad at him, I realized that it was helping me, because that was the only way to try it, right?

[00:27:00] So here I go to Long John Silver's, and I asked for the order of shrimp. And the woman looked at me like, "What? What do you want?" And I'm like, "I want shrimp. The shrimp basket." And she was like, "Do you want a burger?" And I'm like, "No, shrimp. I want the shrimp basket." She kept on telling me other stuff, like, "Do you mean this or the other?" And I was like -- and finally, because it was a sale at that point, and there was a poster with the basket with shrimp. And I said, "Look, see that? I want shrimp." And she said, "Oh, you want shrimp," or whatever pronunciation she did. And I was so upset, I can't believe it. Why? There are not too many things that sound like shrimp. So it was just hard. I used to then move to read lips. So I was always looking at people's mouth, and trying to read what they were saying. And that was another way that I used. [00:28:00] Something that I also encountered was, because the little English that I got in Puerto Rico was pretty good in writing and reading, so I was pretty good. And, while I was at the University of Puerto Rico, pretty much all the books, the biology books

and everything, were in English. So we had to read the books, but we never talked in English. We were talking in Spanish. And we had to write papers, everything was in Spanish. But I was able to comprehend English, enough to communicate in writing. So, when I had doctor's appointments, I would go to the doctors, and I would write down, "I have an appointment." Give it to the clerk, and she thought I was deaf. So, "Oh, at what time is your appointment? Oh, it's at 1:30." So I communicated in writing with any meeting, every place that I had, every time I had the opportunity, I was trying to read people's lips, and write notes, and expect something written back because I was able to do that. But my ears were not used to the language, so I couldn't understand anything.

[00:29:00]

JS: So how long did you stay in Florida? And you said there were very few Latinos in Florida, correct?

ON: Yes. It was funny because we lived at the married student housing, which it was a beautiful experience, as all the people around in that complex were from all over the world, not just Latinos. There were a few Latinos, but they were from Japan, they were from Pakistan, they were from all over. And it was a beautiful experience for me and for my

daughters, listening to all the languages, and looking at people that didn't look like us. Everybody was different. And playing in the playground. And I think that, every once in a while, we'd hear somebody talking in Spanish, and we're like, "Wait a minute." I remember Sarita. I'll never forget Sarita. One night we hear somebody knocking at the door, and we're like, "Somebody's knocking at the door. We don't know anybody." [00:30:00] So we're like, "Who's at the door?" So we opened, and there was this dark-skinned Puerto Rican woman with a big smile. And she said, "Ustedes son puertorriqueños." "Are you Puerto Ricans?" And we were like, "Yes." And she's like, "Oh, my God! I'm from Ponce." She said, "My daughter was playing in the playground earlier, and she said that she heard you talking with the kids in Spanish, and that she thought that you were Puerto Ricans. And she was watching you, watching you come in." So the little girl was so excited that she saw other Puerto Ricans talking in Spanish, that she was watching all the way, just watch which one was our apartment, and then came back with her mother. So we became very good friends. And that's how the few that were around, always try to connect with others, but it was very small group. I then went to Tallahassee Community College,

[00:31:00] basically doing ESL. I was doing intense ESL for pretty much a year, trying to get the vocabulary, and to get the communication. And that's how I got emerged. I did also some commercial art, so I started to do painting. And I was still hoping to be a seamstress, and drawing and designing was not something that I had taken before. So I decided to do that so I can get better in my painting and such. And then we moved. We lived there two and a half years, and we moved to Austin, Texas, as my husband then was accepted for his Ph.D. at the University of Texas. So we moved to Austin, lived in Austin. I went back to school, I went to Austin Community College. And there I started to do some sewing with the university as well, [00:32:00] just volunteer work. And then got to know a community theater project that was in the community, and I started to sew for them part-time. So I was going to school part-time, I was working part-time sewing. And also then got lucky again. The movie industry was growing in Austin, Texas. Later, well, you know -- in the middle of Austin. They started hiring seamstresses, and I got a job working for motion pictures. So my first movie -- actually, *A Mother's Gift*, by Hallmark -- I met Drew Barrymore. The costume designer took me to the hotel where

she was staying, and we walked into the room, and she was wearing a towel. And the costume designer said, "This is Olga Negrón, and she's going to be taking your measurements to make the costumes." And she was like, "Oh, nice to meet you, Olga." [00:33:00] And then she dropped the towel, because she wanted to make sure that there was not one more inch that I had to put when I measured her. So that was funny. So that was my story of meeting a famous person, but I did costumes for many others in movies, a soap opera, musicals. I did a lot of musicals. There was the summer project musical Under the Stars. And every summer there I was with my daughters and my family. And, at the end, I divorced him. I had my third daughter in Austin, Texas, Paloma. And we divorced when my youngest was three. And, at that point, it was when I was actually going back to Puerto Rico. I didn't really have family in Texas at all, in Austin. [00:34:00] So family was something that I was missing a lot, growing among so many -- 11 of us. And I decided to go back to Puerto Rico. But, when I went to visit at that point, I met with some of my teachers, with some of my friends and family. And everybody was telling me, "No, stay there. If you come to Puerto Rico, you only come back to Puerto Rico if you have no other choice."

Things are getting tougher here, and it will be better for you and your daughters to stay there." So I got really puzzled, because first of all, I never wanted to leave Puerto Rico to begin with. And now I'm found all by myself with three babies, and going to Puerto Rico apparently was not an option. So, at that point, I came to New York for a conference, and I got very involved because my daughters were, all of them, in the Head Start program. As I was only working part-time, they qualified, [00:35:00] which was excellent because I only talked in Spanish with my daughters because that's all I spoke. So I remember that's how actually they learned English, going to Head Start.

The Head Start Program really made a big, big difference in their beginning. That's why it's called Head Start, and it really made a difference in their life and where they are today. But I got very involved in the program. I volunteer a lot in the program, learning how to be a mother as well. I've won awards every year, outstanding volunteer. So when I left Austin -- oh, with the Head Start program, I went for a conference in New York. And, when I was New York, I had two sisters already living here in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and cousins, and uncles. So one of my sisters went and picked me up in New York,

brought me to Bethlehem. And that was in June, and you probably know [00:36:00] what happens in the summer, especially in June, in Bethlehem -- the Puerto Rican parade and the festival. So the Puerto Ricans, they would have flags all over, in the cars, wearing flags. And I got so excited, I'm like, "Oh, my God! They're Puerto Ricans in here." It was just amazing. I fell in love. It was love at first sight. But I really loved the city. My sisters did good taking me around the neighborhood, *el* barrio. And then that's when I said, "You know what? Then I'm coming to Bethlehem. I'm going to give it a chance." And I moved here. I stayed with my sister for a few weeks until I got settled. And then, looking for jobs, sewing, all I saw were factory work. And I'm like, "I can't work in a factory. I need theater, I need creativity." I actually got a job offer at the Lehigh University for a contract. [00:37:00] It was a contract, a one year contract, assisting the costume designer there for \$8.00 an hour. That was 22 years ago. No benefits, no job security, only a one year contract. And, at the same time, I applied for Head Start, to work for the Head Start program as a family advocate. And I got a job offer as well, it was \$6.40 an hour, but it included benefits, insurance, and sick days.

And of course I'm thinking, if something happens to my daughters, I need to be able to take off and have health insurance. So I took the job for \$6.40 an hour, with Head Start, as a family advocate, rather than assistant designer at Lehigh University for \$8.00, because I thought it was better job security for me as a single mother. And I'm glad I did. The Head Start program really helped me so much. [00:38:00] I was a family advocate, so helping pretty much single mothers like me. And my job was to help them put goals together -- where do you see yourself in three years, in five years? And then looking for resources so that they could get their goals met. And so, by doing that, I had to learn quickly about the resources in the Lehigh Valley. Where do you go to -- they want to learn English, or get their GED, or go back to school, buy a house. Anything it could have been. It was different for everybody, right? So I had to look for all of these resources, so I really quick learned where everything was in the Lehigh Valley. So that's why I say it was so helpful to me as a single mother in the South Side. So I worked and I moved my way up the ladder, Community Services for Children, which I really appreciate all my time. I loved it there. [00:39:00] Also I had a friend which

helped me at some point and offered me a job. You know, it's funny. If you look at my résumé, I had so many different kinds of jobs, and it's kind of odd. It's like, "Why do you jump from one job to another?" I never looked for a job. The job came to me, like somebody's like, "You know, you should work for me." And I'm going, "Well, why? I love my job." "Well, we've been doing this, and that, and the other." So I got a job after that, with a program called CUNA, Congregations United for Neighborhood Action. And that's an organization, a non-profit, that works under PICO -- Pacific Institute for Community Organizing -- where they're doing faith-based community organizing, training.

So I had the luxury, the privilege to go to DC, to go to California and get trained by incredible trainers (inaudible) under PICO, and this community organizing structure. [00:40:00] And so I, again, I had a privilege again to be trained by the best, and learn about grass root and community organizing. And then I was working with churches, so it was a faith-based program. And it was another eye-opener incredible experience, working with lay leaders and pastors from different churches and different cultures. I believe that -- well, even in Austin, Texas, we also lived in the married student

housing. And, again, it was an incredible experience living amongst a diverse community. Everybody there was different, and we were all embracing that. And it was part of that growing up. And I even remember being at the playground with friends and talking with other mothers in Spanish. And I remember my daughters will come to me and start talking to me in English, and I'll say, "No, no, no. In Spanish. *En Español. No te entiendo.*" [00:41:00] And they insisted to talk to me in English, and I didn't let them, because I wanted them to -- I wanted to make sure that they kept their Spanish. And I said, "I don't speak English. You need to talk to me in Spanish." And I remember still today, my daughter Isis, "Oh, no. That's not true. I saw you talking to that lady in English." So she caught me. So it was a beautiful opportunity we had. And I was then able to feel better, or more comfortable, talking English, because they were people from all over the world, and English was none of their first language. So everybody had an accent. Everybody was trying to say, "How do you say --," because they didn't have that information in their brain, just like me. So that made it easier for me to feel comfortable. *I actually remember,* I breastfed all my three daughters a year, [00:42:00] so I created a La

Leche League, a support group. I know, I've done crazy things in my life. So I remember sitting in the living room or the park even with other moms from all over the world that spoke different languages and very little English. So we had to like, "How do you say this?" "No, the other." So we had to figure it out, how to communicate. And it was good for all of us. Because, not only were we supporting each other as we were breastfeeding our babies, but we were practicing our English. So all of those experiences really made an incredible opportunity for me. That's why I always say we were privileged really. So that's how I got to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

JS: And you mentioned working with lay leaders and pastors. Did you have a faith that you were attached to, or that has formed you? [00:43:00] And were you daughters also practicing faith?

ON: Yes, absolutely. I was born into a Catholic family, and we always say, "Here's the Pope, and here's my mother. She's right there." So that means we prayed the rosary every night. You pray when you get up, you pray before you eat, you just pray. We went to church every Sunday. I remember being ten years old when I was reading in church, they had to literally put a stool so I could get up and reach the

mic. And I still remember an elder lady saying, "That little girl can't read. She's too young." And there I was, I want to read. So I got up to that mic and I read. So I was very involved with church. My parents were. I was also born into a Rotarian family. By the time I was born, Papi was already in Rotary club. By the time I was in middle school, he was the president [00:44:00] of Rotary Club. So every time there was a hurricane in Puerto Rico -- and you know there are hurricanes every year -- my house was the place where everybody dropped off donations. I remember being 12 years old, and I'm packing nonperishable foods, putting clothes, folding clothes, packing them up. Because then we were taking them to the area where the people had lost their homes. So, as a Rotarian family, we were all Rotarian family, meaning we all were very involved with helping mothers, somebody was going to have surgery and needed money, we raised money with the activities. So that was part of -- we were part of the community, being involved in church. It was part of my upbringing. You know "Service Above Self" is the motto for Rotary Club, and that's something that I learned by watching my parents do and, to a point, making me do. Because, as a child, you don't have a choice. [00:45:00] You have to do what you

parents tell you to do, right? So I was literally helping, I was literally packing nonperishable food, and bringing them to the needy. And we were privileged. My dad actually built the biggest building in Naranjito, a supermarket, and a restaurant as well. And I grew working, we all -- it was a family business -- we all work in the business, we all had to put stickers and prices on the cans, and packing and (inaudible) [cashier?]. I did it all. I had to, we all had to work. In the restaurant, my godfather, he's still a chef, a cook, a baker. And I remember working in the kitchen, and learning to make pizza, and steaks, and lobsters. So I grew up in that environment, always had to earn money if I want to buy something. [00:46:00] At 15 I was sewing for others and I would then save money to buy fabric because I was making my own outfits. And it was always service above self, but also working hard to earn your living and what you have. And that was all just part of what I was and what I did. Singing in the choir, reading in the masses, being involved, and being there to help others.

JS: So, would you say, since your sense of service and helping others was ingrained in you since the beginning and then, when you moved to Bethlehem -- there's a big church history

in Bethlehem -- and so did you feel like the church really supported you and your daughters in your life in Bethlehem?

ON: Absolutely, yes. I am still a member of Holy Infancy church which, again, another opportunity in my life.

[00:47:00] Holy Infancy church, they call it the melting pot, right? We have a huge Latino community, not just Puerto Ricans, but Dominicans, Mexicans, and South Americans. But there's also a huge Portuguese community in the church, and then the Anglo, of course, the Pennsylvanians. And so we have masses -- always has been in Spanish, in Portuguese, and in English. And another beautiful opportunity that I've really lived with for the last 23 years is days like Christmas or like Thanksgiving, they have a tri-lingual mass. And it is, again, bringing me back to my life opportunities through my adulthood that I was surrounded by people that might not look like me or might look like me, might speak my language or might not. And it's all part of my blanket and, of course, part of who I am today. [00:48:00]

JS: And so, raising your daughters in Bethlehem, and being involved in so many different kinds of jobs that just seem to fall into your lap, right? It's the kind of person you are, it seems. You show your talents and people are like,

"We need Olga." So can you talk about some more adventures? How did you build yourself up to where you are today as councilwoman? What were some of the formative jobs? You seem to be someone that's very active in helping people so, do you see yourself as an advocate, as an activist? How would you identify, and what sorts of things in Bethlehem have led you to be who you are?

ON: That's a very good question. And what happened, when I moved to Bethlehem, even though I fell in love and got really excited the first time with so many Puerto Rican flags, [00:49:00] it's not the same living in than coming to visit, right? So the first thing that shocked me was the snow. I never saw snow in my life. In Austin got cold, but never, never snow. And I wondered, "Why are so many Puerto Ricans in here again? Why did I move here? Snow?" And a point that I actually, through helping families, I had like five mothers that wanted to buy a house. So I learned about Community Action's first-time home buyer class. And I connected them to take the class. And because I was taking them myself to the class, I took the class. So, along with my other five mothers, I bought my first house. And of course I bought it in South Side because I loved it. That was where our community was, el

barrio. [00:50:00] But, through the process and working with these mothers that had kids in schools -- in public schools in Allentown and in Bethlehem and even Easton -- I saw so much prejudice, I saw so much racial injustice, and kids who were talked down to. There were no high expectations for kids. It really broke my heart. And the way media, the way -- I don't know, I don't know what else to say -- has perpetrated the place of Latinos. It broke my heart. Looking at the mayors, the city council, looking at county level, all levels -- nobody there looked like me. And that was not my normal. That's not how I grew up. I grew up seeing the people in all professions that looked like me. [00:51:00] So it was hard, it was hard. And something that I decided right then and there was to show Bethlehem, to show the Lehigh Valley, who Latinos are, and how are we made of. And I made that promise to myself, and I made sure that my daughters got that. I'm not going to be another number to this statistic. What are the odds? A single mother in the South Side, raising three girls. What are the chances of them dropping out of school, getting pregnant? So I made it very clear and worked really hard to make sure that we were not going to be another statistic. And we were going to show the world who we are,

who Latinos are. And something that I then got really involved was the Puerto Rican parade. A group of community members -- Johnny Cruz was the president back then, we are still good friends -- [00:52:00] and I started to volunteer. I'm like, "I want to be part of this." And, with that, I became so involved that I ended up being the president of the organization. And, to me, it was about teaching my daughters their culture so, to make sure that they understood their culture. So not just talk Spanish, but this is who we are and where we come from. So the Puerto Rican Cultural Coalition, which we created later, that's what we were doing -- educating our kids. My three daughters were all part of -- were queens of the parades. But something that we took a lot of pride -- I took a lot of pride, but we did -- is the process in which we chose the queen. It was not just to be the prettiest one, but it was what you know about your culture. So show us what your culture is like. So we had my oldest daughter, she danced a plena, [00:53:00] in a dress that I made, of course. And that was her showing her pride and how important being Puerto Rican was for her. My second daughter, she actually ran twice. The first year she did not make it. I thought she was still too young, but she wanted to do it. And I

said, "Well, you can do it, but you have to promise me you have to run again next year if you don't make it." And she agreed. So the first time, she actually danced, too, and she didn't make it. She was not the queen. And the second year she actually, she was already talking about writing, and she wrote a beautiful poem. I found it the other day. I have to send it to you. It's called "Mi Borinquen," where she had some racial fight, interactions with kids at school, and how she reacted to it. And she won with that beautiful poem that she wrote, "Mi Borinquen." And then my youngest, she actually sang. She's the artist of the house. [00:54:00] And she sang "Preciosa." And you know you cannot lose when you sing "Preciosa." And she sings beautiful. She actually ends up studying, going to Trinity College for drama, with a minor in voice. So she's doing her dream. She's acting. And it's funny because, when she graduated from a bachelor in drama, I said, "So you're going to do your master's degree now, right? Because what are you going to do with the bachelor degree in drama?" She's like, "Mami, I'm an actress. There's a lot of people that just have a bachelor degree in drama and they are acting, and they've made their life. Do you remember your friends?" And, of course, she had to bring me back to all

I've done with them in acting. And she's doing that. She lives in Philadelphia, and she's acting and singing. And she is also -- she works in a coffee shop. What is the title? I forgot the name of -- somebody that makes coffee the **specialists** -- I forgot. [00:55:00]

JS: A barista?

ON: Barista. She's a barista. But she keeps on acting. She's very talented. Because she's in Philadelphia, she's also helping my oldest daughter, Corazón, who after her bachelor she went to U. Penn. School of Medicine, and graduated **from U. Penn.** and now is starting her last year, her residency as an OB/GYN. So she's delivering babies. And she delivered her own baby last year, so I'm now an abuela, I'm a grandmother, of a beautiful year and a half old daughter, Mailén. And my youngest one, Paloma, gets to help babysit, because they live so close to each other. So it's wonderful. And my second daughter, she lives in Hartford, Connecticut. That's the attorney. She actually speaks -- I don't know -- five languages. [00:56:00] And she's an immigration attorney, and doing very, very well. She's solo now. She's **done** a few things, but now she's solo in her own immigration practice. I'm really proud. So what are the odds that a single Latina mom from the

South Side of Bethlehem, raising three girls and now being placed where they are. And you can talk to any of my daughters any time about their culture, about their identities, and Puerto Rico is right in front, it's right there. It's interesting -- I read stories and articles that they write, and how they always bring back how proud they are of how they were raised. And they can still see the struggle that individuals that come as adults to this area -- to Bethlehem, or to the Lehigh Valley, or to the United States anywhere for that matter -- and the circles that we get to lead. [00:57:00] And it's just beautiful. I am so proud of them.

JS: So I know you had said that you wanted your daughters to keep their Spanish, to not lose that. And that's very important, especially now. Everyone wants you to be bilingual, but let alone know five languages -- that's incredible. But so did you find that your daughters transformed the culture as to something different? To know that they're Puerto Rican, but perhaps growing up in the United States, having that look a little bit different. Did you find that there were any struggles? Or did you find yourself to be amazed at what they did combining their culture with the culture of being here on the mainland?

What was your impression? How have they molded being Puerto Rican and living in the states here?

ON: Well, I believe it's safe for me to say that all three of them are very proud of being Puerto Rican. [00:58:00] And we have got together as family, like we go visit Puerto Rico, and talking to some of the cousins and they'll say, "No, *tu eres* gringa. You were born over there." And they are like, "Excuse me. I'm Puerto Rican." So *their* Puerto Ricans, *la mancha de plátano*. And they will even say to you "*saca la mancha de plátano*." So it's very much implanted in them. I got them so involved with the Puerto Rican parade, and the festival, and all the cultural activities we were doing. Even at church, at Holy Infancy we celebrate the culture. Faith and culture for Latinos is such a blended -- it's such a connected situation that we -- whatever the faith is, it doesn't matter. Or whatever the background in the culture you are, they're connected. We're Latinos, *and* we're people of faith. [00:59:00] We have celebrated every holiday that you can imagine - Los Tres Reyes. Christmas is not over *antes que llegaran* Los Tres Reyes. So it's something that's still today, it's very important. In our family we celebrated it, and I think the girls -- my girls -- have done a wonderful job at

adapting, changing, adjusting, and being part of this life that we have now. Like I said, they have gone way farther than I did. I always say they're all -- each of them -- a better version of me. But being Puerto Rican is always something that they have had. And, during these times, when we are suffering and we're talking about Black Life Matters, and the issues and the tensions that brown and black people are going through. We talked about it. And so my daughter Isis has [01:00:00] posted on Facebook video that she created and shared with her sisters, and friends and family. But it's so beautiful to see them now understanding the concept. Talking about, just because we are lighter skinned, I'm darker skinned than they are -- and the fact that they speak English without an accent like I do. Which is like so many other Latinos that were not born or raised here, we speak with an accent. And they are so aware of that, and they talk about it, even that fact, it gives us privilege. They understand and sympathize, and are able to -- it's just incredible, because they're just brilliant, and have this big heart, and are aware. And, through all of the pain that we are living right now in our country, it's beautiful to -- it makes me very proud to see them [01:01:00] acknowledging the differences, and the fact

that, because they speak English without an accent, that gives them opportunities, privileges again, that some of us will never have. The treatment they get, the respect they get, the attention they get, versus what we don't. So yet they speak up with pride about their Latinx experience and life.

JS: Would you say, since we are talking a little bit about race and privilege, within the Latino community here in Bethlehem, or within the Lehigh Valley that you work with, do you find that there is a discrimination within the [01:02:00] community itself? Like someone being Afro-Latina and then someone being on the lighter side, and seeing that dynamic. You might both be Puerto Rican, but maybe one person is treated way differently than another. Have you experienced that at all, or have you seen that here?

ON: Yes, it's not as strong as it is back in Puerto Rico but, in Puerto Rico I remember -- still today -- but I remember people with darker skin were always treated differently than people with lighter skin. It's just a privilege, and the economic status as well. I think that the differences that I've seen here that costs us stressors upon ourselves is actually the fact that, "Oh, you're Puerto Rican," "No,

you're not Puerto Rican enough, you weren't born here."

"You don't speak Spanish. [01:03:00] You're not Puerto Rican enough." Those tensions I've seen. And it's sad because, for me, if you just tell me you're Puerto Rican, that's enough for me. I don't need to see your birth certificate. Or you don't even have to speak Spanish, because I understand that the stigma that many Latinos that came to the states, came to Bethlehem as adults, and were speaking with an accent, and how mistreated they were, how they were talked down to. They didn't want the kids to go through that, so they didn't talk Spanish to their kids. The kids only learned English, because they wanted to make sure that their kids didn't go through what they went through. And how are you going to blame somebody for trying to save your kids, to make sure they don't go through the issues that you went through? And then the other difference is among Dominicans or South Americans, Puerto Ricans. Some individuals might not [01:04:00] have the great respect from others. Something that I was also privileged with is, when I first moved here, I met Guillermo Lopez and Isabel Lopez. Actually I worked with her and I remember doing diversity workshops, and I went to the train the trainer, so I became a trainer for diversity

workshops. And, again, because of my background, living in married student housing, being among people from other cultures, learning about the food, the language -- that was just part of life. It was the normal way. So I was very intrigued and interested in diversity training, so that's why I became a trainer. And the National Coalition Building Institute is the organization that I got involved with and it, again, gave me opportunity to learn and respect individuals that didn't look like me, didn't speak like me, didn't have the same religion as me. [01:05:00] And that's the way I raised my daughters as well. I love and respect everybody just the way they are, no matter their sex preference, or the color of the skin, or their language.

JS: So, with all that being said, you've done so, so much. How would you describe your current vocation? So, if someone said, "Oh, Olga, what do you do?" how would you answer that question?

ON: Well, it's funny because it depends where I'm at. The answer might be different. But, being a councilwoman, it's something that I'm very passionate about. First of all, I'm the first Latina elected official in the city of Bethlehem in the city council, that is. And I help --

through the years, I got involved with politics and I help other candidates running. [01:06:00] And, to me, it's something I was very interested in doing. And, as I was doing that, I was noticing that nobody looked like me here.

Because I worked for the City of Allentown as a neighborhood coordinator, I was very involved with city council meetings, and to defend my grants, and all that kind of stuff. And I learned a lot about speaking up and the accountability that city council played, the role they played. So I got more and more interested in running. And a lot of people were telling me, "You should run for council." And I said, "I don't know. They've never had a Latina on council." It get to the point that I said, you know what? I kept on saying for a long time when my daughters graduate from high school, my youngest, I'll run. And that's exactly what I did. When my youngest daughter graduated from high school, I ran. And I ran thinking I'm probably going to lose, because I helped Latino candidates run, and saw them. So I said, "Well, at least I can say I did it, I ran." [01:07:00] And, to my surprise, I won. And then I'm like, "Well, okay. Now I'll have to do it, right?" And it was really a great experience. It was very frustrating at the beginning. I was sitting at a table

with six men, with six white men that didn't even know how to talk to me. That many times, oh my God, talked down to me, ignored me. Still today. But it was harder, it was really tough. And that got me to whether I wanted to run for reelection or not. And I'm like, "I don't know, this is hard." It was easier to help somebody else run -- to talk about this person is the best because of this and that. Talking about yourself, it was so hard for me to do that. And, even through the process, I got booed once.

[01:08:00] It was a candidate night and all the candidates were there. And you cannot just imagine. Everyone got up, they're all white boys. And they say, "My name is so-and so, and I was born and raised in Bethlehem, and I went to Liberty, and my dad works at the steel, and my mother works at --." And here comes Olga Negrón. "I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. Let's see, what can I say?" So I got booed, I got booed when I said I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. Right then and there, "Boo!" And, yes, I cried a lot that night. It was a tough process and, even once I was there, I was stuck. But it was really enlightening to not only make it there, but run for reelection, and being the highest vote-getter. I still can't believe it, but it means a lot to me. And, even last

night, at city council meeting, when I hear members of council telling me, "Yes, we should rely on you to seek Latino involvement, because you have the voice in the Latino community, [01:09:00] and you're the one they go to." And I'm like, "Sure. I'd be glad to be that liaison. But, you know what? I don't only represent the Latino community. I won my position because white people voted for me, because white people trusted me." And I still today receive calls and emails from residents of the city of Bethlehem that do not look like me or speak like me, and say, "Thank you for representing me. Thank you for being my councilwoman." And that means the world to me, because, again, not just that we should have a community where the leaders look like them. And, to me, there's nothing wrong with that. That's the way it should be. I grew up watching that. But, like I said at the beginning that should be the norm. And it is not okay not to have that. [01:10:00] But, just the same way, city council in Bethlehem is at large, therefore I am the councilwoman for everybody in this city. And I was elected not just because of the Latino vote, but because people who don't look like me supported me and voted for me.

JS: So, with that support -- and it sounds like it took a while to get where you are now, versus, like you said, sitting in a room with six other white men -- must've been just daunting. But, I guess during that time, when you're trying to be who you are amongst people that don't look like you, speak differently from you, born and raised here. So what clubs, or what organizations, what movements in Bethlehem were you a part of that made you continue to feel empowered to do your work and to be there for the community? [01:11:00]

ON: Well, definitely the Puerto Rican Cultural Coalition was my niche. The Puerto Rican Beneficial Society, which is also known as the Puerto Rican club, is also another place where I can hang out and listen to my music, and drink a Corona -- or now a Medalla, because they finally made it to Bethlehem. But I also have to say that I have a safety net. I have a lot of family here, good friends. But I also have an employer, right? City council is not a full-time job, so I am the community liaison for a law firm, HGSK, where we have 20-some attorneys. But 80 percent of our clients are Latinos. And so, most of the time, I'm serving as interpreter, which I love doing, because I know what it's like not to be able to be understood or

understand. And I'm the face of the law firm. [01:12:00]
But I have a group of partners and attorneys that have
highest respect for me, that always reach out. Even at
both campaigns that I did, they did fundraisers for me.
They were there. My boss actually introduced me when I
decided to run for the first time and the second time. So
they believed in me, they supported me. It's very
important, because then I am around white men of power --
the partners, the attorneys -- and they treat me with great
respect. I think that's really, really important. And it
doesn't keep me down. It helps me move along, because I
know that not everybody is going to treat me the way I'm
sometimes treated on the council.

JS: And can you talk about how your work in Bethlehem, how it's
connected nationally to other movements? Or how you've
stayed connected to [01:13:00] Puerto Rico, especially in
the midst of hurricanes and some natural devastation issues
with government? Can you talk about what it's been like
being the bridge person for that?

ON: Sure, sure, with great pride. First, when Huracán María
hit Puerto Rico, that devastation that hurt the entire
island. And, immediately my family, and friends, because
we were not able to communicate with families there. But,

as we help in different ways, raising money and sending it to Puerto Rico, or collecting goods and sending them, to all the way to creating a movement and welcoming Puerto Ricans moving to the Lehigh Valley. Because hundreds, thousands, of Puerto Ricans move to the Lehigh Valley -- to Pennsylvania, especially but to the Lehigh Valley was one of the spots. But Philadelphia was first, Lancaster, and Reading, of course, and Lehigh Valley. [01:14:00] So I played a very key role during that process from the beginning, raising the money to send, raising the goods to send. But also putting together little events with our state, city, local, non-profit organizations that provided information. We had a fair that was going around the commonwealth, but I helped in putting that together here in Allentown and in Bethlehem, where we were able to welcome, invite Puerto Ricans, to come and they get food, and learn how to get their driver's license, how to apply for benefits, how to get a home, how to get to the class for first-time home buyers, and all this information. And there I was, it was cool and I was wearing my Puerto Rican flag shirt, of course. [01:15:00] And every time somebody walked in, I was so excited to say, "Bienvenidos, Como estas!" And, just looking at their face, to go, "Oh! You

speak Spanish." And immediately my first question, I immediately say, "I'm from Naranjito, *de donde tu eres?*." So, with that pride, we welcome them with that emotion. I know it made a big difference, and made good friends that we're still friends. So, but then later, *as of* January 2020 with the earthquakes, I worked together with the Hispanic Center and the Mega radio station, and we did a radio marathon where we raised money. And, because of all the challenges and the difficulties that the island has gone through in many different ways, including politics and government, the group decided to, the money was raised was given to the Red Cross, just to make sure the money was going to go to the community. And, to make it even better, we built a really good relationship [01:16:00] with the Red Cross. So we actually went on a trip with elected officials from the Lehigh Valley to Puerto Rico, because the Red Cross was going to go with a team, and were going to visit and show what the things that they do. I felt like I had an obligation to be there to record and take pictures of what is really happening, how the Red Cross is really utilizing the money, the way the Puerto Ricans were dealing with -- those towns in the south where the devastation was. So it was a great opportunity and, then

again, we had meetings in here with a congresswoman, with other elected officials, and trying to make sure they understood that this devastation was going to cost once again, that Puerto Ricans were going to come to the Lehigh Valley. And it has happened, and that's exactly what we are now working with and dealing with. It's really hard because organizations [01:17:00] like the Hispanic Center -- which is the key place in the community where people go to get help with food, and rent assistance, or whatnot -- they don't have the funding necessarily to be able to help everybody that gets through the door. So, again, I'm always trying to help. And the law firm has gotten to the point that now I am the community liaison for the law firm, and the law firm pays me. But I am also the public relations for the Hispanic Center. They decided that, even though I work for them I would also share my working time where I'm needed. And that's why, a lot of people think I actually work for the Hispanic Center, because I spend a lot of time. We actually rent space from the Hispanic Center, another way for the firm to help the Center. But then you have me there, physically in the Center, and the site where people can go, and talk to me, and see me, and I can connect them, [01:18:00] which is something that you

asked me before. I think I'm an advocate, but I'm also a connector, and that's one of my favorite things to do. To be able to connect individuals, whether it is people that are seeking opportunities to meet others, Latinos, or people that want to get involved, or just individuals that need connecting with appropriate resources. So that's part of who I am and what I do on a daily basis.

JS: You have very strong ties to the Hispanic Center, working for HGSK, but you're also a big advocate for the library as well. Can you talk a little bit about how you fell into your position at the library, and how you became a board member?

ON: Yes, absolutely. That's the fun part of all of my stories. When we lived in the South Side, my house in Bethlehem, we didn't have internet. We didn't have a computer actually back then. [01:19:00] But yet, that didn't mean that my daughters needed to do homework, and needed the internet. So the library was it. The South Side branch, especially, it was like our second home. My daughters after school -- they went to Holy Infancy School, which is across the street from the library, was at that point. Now they moved. But after school they went to the Boys & Girls Club, which was next door, and the library. So Brenda, the

director, I always tease her that my daughters were her assistants. They were there. She helped me raise my kids. I always tell the librarians in the South Side that they really helped me raising my daughters, because many times I was working late and had to do meetings. So it was me running, and Brenda was there waiting with my daughters, waiting for me. So my daughters grew up in the library because I was working and going to school. Many times I, --- while living in Austin, we living in Tallahassee -- and the father of my daughters, [01:20:00] divorced, also going to school, obviously. So we, the girls, grew up in the library, like really everywhere we were, where we lived, we went to the library. That was the place. That was our grounding safe place, besides church, was the library. So, moving to Bethlehem was no different. So I found the library right away and I knew what to do in there, and how to get my daughters engaged and involved, to love books, to love to read, and to be involved with what was going on, activities and all. So it was very easy for me to just be in there, and the staff, bilingual staff, very helpful and very loving of all people. It was just a beautiful experience. It was like a second home, to the point that later on I had a computer, and I had internet. But yet we

always went back to the library. Even, not too long, the last time having trouble with the printer always running out of ink. [01:21:00] I'm like, you know what? I'm not going to buy another new printer. I'm just going to the library. So I really ended up using the library anyway, even if it was just to print something. But checking out books and learning. And it got to the point actually that, when I decided to run for council, I was working at that point for the radio station. And it was a full-time job, that was actually like 80 hours a week. And I realized that, in order for me to run a campaign, I couldn't do that. So, at that point, I decided to get a part-time job, because I was so involved volunteering with the library, I ended up getting the job at the library. So I was the adult technician for the library, working part-time. And that gave me the time to be able to run a campaign. So I was able to run for city council because I had a lot of time available, [01:22:00] because I was working part-time at the library. And, of course, it was an opportunity to meet people, to know people. I was in charge of the Homebound programs, so I was bringing books to adults that are voters. And they get to know me and I talk to them about what they like to read. And it was just a great

opportunity for me to be right there with the people, with the community. So it was a win-win for all of us.

Actually, my plan was to stay working for the library, but that's something else that I got hassled with. Individuals saying, "So you work for the library? You can't be in council, because then you're going to be voting for your own salary." And I'm like, "No, that's not true. I just have to abstain. I don't need to be part of that vote, for example." But people didn't get it. They started to harass me with anything they could. And that's when I decided to make the decision to just not be with library.

[01:23:00] Actually, you know what? I missed something. I was on the library board before. Because -- yes, yes, yes, I forgot that. So I was on the library board. It was actually the mayor now. He was the person on the city council, and somebody gave him my name, because he didn't really even know me. And he asked me if I wanted to be on the library board, representing the city. And I said, "Sure, I would love to." I was already involved. I don't know if it was Brenda that gave my name, I don't know. But I ended up being on the library board, and that's how I learned about the position available, when I decided to run, and ended up working for the library. So, once I won,

I resigned the job with the library. All of these years I've been working for the law firm, but part-time or in a contract basis. I was serving as the interpreter then. And, because I was doing through all the years so many community works, [01:24:00] they always reached out to me. They always wanted to be involved with community events, and support sponsor events. So they always reached out to me, like, "Olga, what's going on in Bethlehem? We want to give you money." So I, of course, wanted their money. So I was always connected with the law firm somehow for the last 18 years and they said to me, "When are you going to come work for us full-time?" And, at that point, I reached out to the boss again, and I said, "Hey, are you ready to hire me? I need a job." And I actually started working part-time, just like I was doing at the library. But it got to the point that it was a lot of work. But I'm full-time. I don't even remember for how long. Five years? Six years? And it's been great, a win-win. Because they allow me the opportunity to do council work, really. I get to go to meetings during the daytime. I get to meet constituents, even when I'm at the Hispanic Center. There are ribbon cuttings that happen during the day [01:25:00] that many members of council, because of their job, that

they can't go. And there I am. And it's because the law firm really believes that I'm a community liaison for the law firm, that means they want me out there in the community. So it's a win-win. It's beautiful to feel not just respected, but appreciated, to have that support that I get from them as I do my work in council. So, to me, it's almost like a big melting pot.

JS: And so we have about five minutes left, and we want to honor your time. But I guess my last question for you is, in your whole time in Bethlehem, what good positive changes have you seen, and what are some of the challenges that remain? And you can take this for the Puerto Rican people, for the Latino people, or just the larger community.

[01:26:00]

ON: Okay. Well, when I moved to Bethlehem was when the Bethlehem Steel shut down. And I didn't really know a lot. I didn't know anything about the history, right? Until I got here and I started to read about it, and learn about it, and listen to stories. I listened how Puerto Ricans were getting here. At the same time, realizing the importance to get involved. I think I was proud, really proud, of the creativity in which the leadership took to move Bethlehem forward. Bethlehem Steel became the biggest

brownfield in the nation, because all the Bethlehem Steel and [dying?]. So, in that scene, that depression that the city went through in that time, and it's flourishing. We have become alive again. There's light, it's brilliant again. [01:27:00] And so a lot of energy, a lot of money went into it. So I think that has been a beautiful thing that I've seen. I remember when I bought my house in the South Side, my sisters kept on saying, "Don't buy your house in the South Side. That's crime infested. It's not a good place. You're crazy, wasting your money like that." And that's why I love the South Side. I like the diversity, the color. And that was a challenge to me then. I really needed to get involved and make sure that change was going to happen. So I did, I started to get involved. I became a board member with the South Side Initiative. And that helped me connect with what was going on, and have a voice at the table, and make sure that I was going to be part of that change. And I did, and I think that's what helped people to get to know me, people that didn't look like me to get to know my style, my ways, how I am. And it is what my parents taught me. I am who I am because of what they taught me. [01:28:00] So I think that it's been beautiful seeing that development of the community. What

makes me sad is the fact that we have not taken into consideration the administration, and started taking into consideration that the change, how drastically has changed, damaged the quilt of the South Side, especially. I have now some individuals that come and say, "You know, I haven't driven around the South Side in a long time, and it's horrible. You see all these student housing homes that used to be family. It's not anymore, there are no families." So a lot has changed that we should not allow. We're working on an ordinance that I hope we can pass soon and change that. But I think that the other part is, again, looking at the black and brown people. As you look at the administration, or elected officials, or individuals making important choices, like commissions and boards.

[01:29:00] We need to have more diversity. Latinos should be part of this. And many times I've asked a lot of Latinos would they like to be involved with the library board, with the planning commission. And a lot of them say -- I know they're very capable -- and they say, "I would love to, but they're not going to choose me. They're not going to appoint me." And that's the fight that I'm fighting, as of last night in the city council meeting, if you listened to it. So it's a fight that I will continue

to fight because I think that, especially with what's going on all around the nation, it is important that we get our voice to be heard. But, more important, we as Latino community, need to get involved. We cannot just say, "Yes, we should be part of it." Well, you need to be part of it. So I really hope that my Latino community that is very, very capable, plays a stronger role, a more leadership role, across the city, with organizations, with boards, with commissions, and for city council. [01:30:00]

JS: Thank you so much. Is there anything that you would like to share that maybe we haven't covered yet, or that we haven't addressed?

ON: Well, something else that I get to say, even though I was not able to stay with the library once I became a member of council, I became the liaison to the city council and the library. So I am still on the board, the library board, which is something that is really important to me. And I'm doing so representing the city council. So I play different roles as a councilwoman and as a community liaison for the law firm, but I've always believed that everything I do kind of like goes together, whether it's my role on the library board, my role as a member of the community at large, and playing, doing what I need to do to

represent and speak up for my people. [01:31:00] [Section redacted by interviewee.]

JS: And lastly, do you have any documents or photos, anything that is related to the Bethlehem Latino community that you would want to share for this project to be archived?

ON: Oh, my God, yes. What an honor! Of course, I would love to. Yes, yes. I will have to dig in, in records. But I would love to be able to share. [01:33:00] Yes, memories, absolutely.

JS: Wonderful. Then we can be in touch about how that would work, and how you can add that to the archive. Is there anything else that you want to share for this project?

ON: Well, I want to say thank you for the opportunity. It's an honor. But I hope -- and I know -- that it's going to be part of the library history. So I am excited to be part of it, to be involved with this. But, more than anything, it's another way not to be invisible anymore. It's another way to know that a voice is going to be heard. So thank you for doing this.

JS: Well, thank you so much for your time and for your experience. It's just such a gift, I think, for a community to hear some Latino voices in the midst of a lot of other history we have out there. And our history is

here, but I think it needs to be seen, [01:34:00] it needs to be heard. So thank you so, so much for everything.

ON: Absolutely. Can I say one last thing?

JS: Absolutely.

ON: You see the picture behind me? *Platanos amarillos*? I painted that.

JS: Did you really?

ON: Yes, I did.

JS: That's beautiful! I've been staring at it a lot during this interview.

ON: Yes, *my Platanos amarillos*. I did that when I was studying art in Texas. So it was in a museum exhibition back there when I was working in there. But I love it. It's one of my favorites. *It's another thing that grounds me. Looking at things and being close to what we have.*

JS: It looks like you've kept all your artistry up all these years, too. In all of your activism, you're still very much the artist and the contributor.

ON: Well, I don't paint anymore, although I do some things here and there, but not -- sewing. I have done, like for Touchstone Theatre, they did the *UnBound Festival* at the end of last year (2019). I did the costume for *Prometheus*. [01:35:00] That was so much fun. I was like, I should be

doing this. I love it! And I've been sewing my daughters' prom dresses, or wedding -- because one got married already. So Halloween costumes, and when they were in high school, they all participated in the musicals. So I was the mom that walked in with the sewing machine to the hall. So I've been able to sew here and there. I'm so busy, though, that I don't really have a lot of time. But I love sewing, and there's so many other talents. I love cooking and, learning -- I was saying that I lived in married student housing. So meeting people from all over the world. I'm a very unique Puerto Rican that eats different kinds of food, that loves -- I remember the first time I grew a garden in my house in the South Side. I remember my sisters looking at my plants. I had jalapeños, poblano peppers. [01:36:00] And they're like, "What is that?" I'm like, "It's a poblano pepper." They're like, "A poblano pepper? Where did you learn about poblano pepper?" When I lived in Texas seven and a half years. I love poblano peppers. So I learned to do, and to eat things, and to be intrigued. And I always wanted to know the story behind what I just see. So I think that kind of makes me a little bit of a different kind of Puerto Rican. I'm not just a

rice and beans kind of Puerto Rican. So anyways, this was fun. Thank you so much again for the opportunity.

JS: Thank you so much for your time with us. And yes, hopefully we'll get to talk about your documents, and what you would like to see archived as part of this project.

ON: Beautiful, beautiful. Thank you so much again. And I'll look at my pictures and stuff, okay?

JS: Wonderful, thank you so much.

ON: Okay, take care.

JS: Have a great day.

ON: Good seeing you. *Cuidate*

JS: Good seeing you, too. *Cuidate*. Ciao.

END OF AUDIO FILE