

RUTGERS THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH EVA FONTANEZ

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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FLEMINGTON NEW JERSEY

SEPTEMBER 18, 2018

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kevin Rosero: This is Kevin Rosero. The date is September 18, 2018. The time is 3:11 PM on a Tuesday, and I am at 2 Furman Lane in Flemington, New Jersey. I am going to do an interview with ...

Eva Fontanez: Eva Fontanez.

KR: Okay. Hey, Eva.

EF: Hi, Kevin.

KR: When and where were you born?

EF: I was born in the Bronx, and that was back in the late '50s, 1959. I was born in the Bronx from Puerto Rican parents.

KR: You said you were born in the Bronx, but your family was from Puerto Rico. Is that where you grew up, or did you grow up somewhere else?

EF: Well, actually, I lived most of my life in New Jersey, even though I was born in the Bronx. My mom always tried to look for a better place for us to live, so we moved around a lot. So I was raised in New Jersey and went to high school in Brooklyn, and then from Brooklyn, we moved back to the Bronx. Then from there, we moved back to Puerto Rico.

KR: So, still going a little bit back, talking about your early years, what was it like living in the Bronx?

EF: Well, I grew up in a Pentecostal home, so it was church and school, school and church. That was basically it. We did play outside, ride bike, jump rope, played handball. It was a simple life. My mom was very strict about us being Pentecostal, especially my stepfather being a pastor. So it was even more strict for us because we were the pastor's kids. But I don't regret having been raised that way.

KR: What were your parents' names?

EF: Well, my mom's name was Maria Rodriguez Sierra, and my stepfather, who raised me, was Neftalí Arroyo. But my father's name is Miguel Angel Fontanez.

KR: You mentioned stepfather. Was your biological father in the picture?

EF: Not really. Actually, I'm the seventh child of my mom. When I was a small little kid, probably a month or so old, my mom and dad got divorced, and my stepfather Neftali Arroyo was the one who raised me.

KR: What did your parents do for a living?

EF: Well, my stepfather--well, I'm going to refer to my stepfather because my father, like I said, wasn't really much in the picture. My stepfather was a minister and a pastor of the church, and my mom was the wife of a pastor, but my mom by trade was a seamstress. She was a seamstress in the garment district in New York. But she was a pastor's wife, a minister, and she was also a missionary.

KR: Do you have brothers or sisters?

EF: Yes, I have plenty of brothers and sisters. My mom had eight kids. She had six girls and two boys. Then I have two sisters from my father's side.

KR: How did your mom and stepdad meet?

EF: Well, I don't really recall how they met, but I know that my stepfather was way younger than my mom. He married my mom, who already had seven kids and was close to forty years old. He was very young. He was about twenty years old.

KR: What type of food do you remember eating in the Bronx?

EF: At home, we always ate Puerto Rican food--*arroz y habichuela*, *arroz con gandules*, and *bistek encebollado*. Whenever when we had extra money, we had *bistek*. Otherwise, it was chicken and *chuletas*. Then for lunch, we had a lot of Chef Boyardee spaghetti.

KR: What type of music do you remember listening to?

EF: Growing up in a Pentecostal church, all we listened to was gospel music. That's all we listened to. As boring as that sounds, I'm grateful for that.

KR: Were they strict with certain stuff? I don't really know that much about the Pentecostal religion.

EF: Yes, the Pentecostal religion, especially for women--it was really rough on us. We couldn't cut our hair; we weren't allowed to wear pants. We couldn't shave our legs. We couldn't put on makeup. So, growing up in the Bronx and in New Jersey, I was grateful that we had the hairy legs because since we weren't allowed to wear pants, at least the hairy legs kept us warm.
[laughter]

KR: Among Puerto Ricans, is Pentecostal big for the region?

EF: I believe so. I believe that among Puerto Ricans and also a lot of African Americans, it's big. Some of them are Baptist, but a lot of them grow up Pentecostal too.

KR: And what was your first language?

EF: We spoke Spanish in the house. Even though we were born here, my mom never allowed us to speak English in the house because she always said that we were going to learn the English

language in school. So, actually, even though I was born in the Bronx and raised in the Bronx when I went to school, I didn't know much English until I got to school and learned English. I also learned to read Spanish first. My mom taught us how to read the Bible.

KR: Wow. What else do you remember about growing up in the Bronx?

EF: Well, growing up in the Bronx, we learned to be Yankee fans. To this day, I'm a diehard Yankee fan, and my whole family is Yankee fans. Back then, we took it for granted, going to the games there. Then, after I grew up and returned from Puerto Rico, I began to go to the Yankee games. Basically, it was really boring at times. But I didn't know it was boring because I enjoyed it. We didn't have much in the house being such a big family. We used to go to church and go to school. We used to go to church every night and twice on Sundays. We used to go to sleep very late at night. I remember in the mornings as kids, my mom used to make sure that we had our coffee in the morning because we used to go to sleep so late. So in order to stay up late in school, we used to drink coffee. [laughter] I believe that stumped my growth. [laughter]

KR: Do you have any favorite childhood memories you'd like to share?

EF: Childhood memories. Besides our outdoor games, we had some very modest and economical vacations. Our vacations were either going to Washington, D.C. or to Niagara Falls. Those were church fundraising trips. So those were the only vacations we could afford. But those were our fun times. We were a big fun family. My mom and my stepdad had a great sense of humor, so we always liked to play board games and joke around at home. That was our entertainment, and we enjoyed it. I never missed anything else, because that's all we knew.

KR: What was the Hispanic population like in the Bronx when you were growing up?

EF: Well, I think everybody that came from Puerto Rico ended up in the Bronx. Seriously, it's just like everyone that comes from Cuba ends up in Miami. I think everybody that came from Puerto Rico ended up in the Bronx. So, there was a large population, just like there is now.

KR: But how come the Bronx? Why not Brooklyn or Manhattan or Queens? Do you know? Why did your family--if you were born in the Bronx, but your family is from Puerto Rico--why did they come from Puerto Rico to the Bronx?

EF: I don't really know. I believe my mom came to the Bronx with my dad with the first child she had. All the others were born in New York, except the youngest, who was born in New Jersey. I don't know if my dad had family there. See, that part of my family I never asked my mom about. But I'm thinking that my dad had family in the Bronx, and that's why they ended up in the Bronx because then after that, all my aunts and uncles from my mom's side started coming to the Bronx. Then, even my grandmother came. So everybody kept coming to the Bronx. I think that's the same case with many of the Puerto Rican families that are there in the Bronx. Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island are also populated with Latinos. Puerto Ricans and Latinos, in general, are everywhere. It's hard to get rid of us.

KR: Unfortunately, we are going to have to pause this interview for a brief second.

[tape paused]

KR: Okay, this is Kevin Rosero and ...

EF: Eva Fontanez.

KR: We are going to continue the interview. So, before I move into transition, you did mention off camera you wanted to talk a little bit about commuting Brooklyn.

EF: Yes, because, like I mentioned before, when we moved out as a kid after we moved from the Bronx, we lived in New Jersey. We lived all over New Jersey. We lived in Passaic, New Jersey; Elizabeth, New Jersey; Newark, New Jersey. And then from Passaic, New Jersey, we moved to Brooklyn because my stepfather was offered to pastor a church there. Then in Brooklyn, that's where I went to high school. I went to Bushwick High School in Brooklyn. But then two years after I started high school there, that's when we moved back to the Bronx. So instead of transferring me to the high school in the Bronx, I used to commute every day from [the Bronx]--take the train to Brooklyn to high school until I graduated high school. Then from there, from high school, that's when I attended María Eugenio de Hostos Community College, located in the Bronx on 149th street. I studied there, but I only studied there for a year. Due to financial reasons at the house, I decided to get a job to help my now single mom. I've been working all my life. Once I got to Raritan Valley Community College, I continued my studies.

KR: Before we jump into all that, you said you lived in Passaic and Elizabeth. Were you there for small periods of time, or were you there for a while? I want to ask you about the Latino population there.

EF: I was a kid there. When we moved to Elizabeth, I attended first grade in Elizabeth. Then from Elizabeth, we moved to Newark. Then from Newark, we moved to Passaic, where we lived most of my school years (from third grade all way until my first year of high school). Then, after my first year of high school was when we moved to Brooklyn.

KR: How was it living in Passaic compared to the Bronx?

EF: Well, Passaic was nicer back then, of course; this was in the '70s. It wasn't as, I guess, let's say, low class as it is now. It was nice and safer, I guess than the Bronx. I never really thought that I was in danger or that we lived in not so good neighborhoods. I never thought about that because I was a kid and my parents always knew where we were. Even when I used to walk to the high school in Brooklyn, I never thought--because it wasn't that great of an area either--that I was unsafe. I never thought of it because that's where I used to live all the time, so it was part of me already.

KR: After living in New York, then New Jersey, then back to New York, I believe you also lived in Puerto Rico for some time, no?

EF: Yes.

KR: What happened? I don't know if it was after community college.

EF: Yes. This was back in 1980 because I left the college after a year.

KR: What did you study there, by the way?

EF: I studied business administration. The difference from the high school back then and the ones now, I had to choose a major when I was in high school back in the '70s. I always chose secretarial or business. Once you left high school, you were ready to work. It's almost like you didn't really need to go to college if you chose a major because you're already prepared. But I went to college, and I still studied business administration there for one year. I was the first one, out of my whole household, I was the first one out of my household to go to college. Due to some financial situations at my home, I had to postpone college and go to work. I worked for Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. While working there, my mom decided she wanted to move back to Puerto Rico to die where she was born. I had never been to Puerto Rico. I said, "Well, let's visit Puerto Rico first." So we visited, and then I fell in love with Puerto Rico. Then, my mom says, "Let's move to Puerto Rico." In 1980, we moved back to Puerto Rico.

KR: Where in Puerto Rico?

EF: In Las Piedras, Puerto Rico. Now, that was really different because we were living in the Bronx, in the city. Then, my mom wanted to live in Barrio Pueblito del Rio in Las Piedras, and that was pure country.

KR: Rural.

EF: Rural area. Where we lived, there were no phones. No phones! You had to drive to town to use a phone. We were raising chickens. We were raising pigs. I worked for a pharmaceutical company--a good job, but still, we were in the country and no phones. We barely had TV, two or three channels only, but I could almost say it was the best years of my life because I loved it. We lived there for nine years. My younger sister finished high school there. I enjoyed living over there. That's where I actually learned how to drive because I didn't bother learning how to drive in the Bronx because you could just hop on the subway or hop on the bus. In New York City, if you learned how to drive and you need to park your car on the street, that was a bitch because you had to move your car early in the morning to park it on the other side because they were going to do cleaning on that side. At any rate, that's why I never learned how to drive in New York. But once I got to Puerto Rico, the last bus, that little van that would take you up to where I lived, would stop at five o'clock in the afternoon. I would be out of luck. How would I get to my house? So that's when I said, "Well, I guess I need to learn how to drive."

KR: Who was with you when you moved?

EF: When I moved to Puerto Rico, my sister Rose. She's my youngest sister. She's the number eight in the family. She moved with us because she finished high school there, and then my sister Sonia and her son moved with us to Puerto Rico and, of course, my mom.

KR: Can you describe the first moments when you got to Puerto Rico to actually live there? You mentioned a few of the differences, but what was the biggest culture shock from living in New Jersey and New York and living in Las Piedras, Puerto Rico?

EF: Well, the biggest thing, I think, was the transportation. If you didn't have a car, if you didn't know how to drive, it was really hard to get around because it was in the country. I lived up on a hill, and like I said before, there were no phones. There was no cell phones. At that time, there was no cell phones, but there were no house phones in that area. You would have to go to town. You would have to take a bus or something down to town to make a phone call there. The other thing was that since I was born in the Bronx and raised in the States, people noticed that I had an accent, an American accent, so they say. They used to think that I was antisocial because I spoke English every once in a while with my sisters, or they would listen to us speak English. So they would think we were antisocial, that we were stuck-up because we knew English, until they got to know us. After they got to know us, they loved us.

KR: How is the weather in New York and New Jersey compared to Puerto Rico?

EF: Well, Puerto Rico is always summer. It's always nice and warm, except during the tornado season and the storm season. But basically, it was warm all year round, and, of course, no snow, no winter. So, that was the difference.

KR: You mentioned you were there for nine years. What happened after the nine years?

EF: After the nine years, we decided to move back little by little. First of all, wherever my mom moved, the whole family moved. My mom was a strong and dominating woman. Even my sisters that were married to their husbands and had kids, they eventually followed my mom. So basically, almost the whole family moved to Puerto Rico, little by little, and then moved back to New Jersey as well.

KR: What happened to your stepdad during all this?

EF: My stepdad and my mom, by that time, they were separated. Well, they weren't even divorced; they had just gotten separated. So he went his own way, and my mom went her own way.

KR: He didn't keep in contact with you or your siblings?

EF: Well, yes, sort of. Yes, he did. He always called on us to find out how we were doing. But yes, he had separated from my mom.

KR: Going back to your mom moving, it's a good thing she didn't pass away in Puerto Rico. What made her go back to the States?

EF: Oh, yes. So then, after all the whole family was there, little by little, they were all coming back because my mom decided that she wanted to come back. So my mom, in those nine years,

she didn't pass away. She was missing New York or New Jersey. She was missing the States, so little by little--well, since Mom was going to be moving back, well, we were all moving back. We all moved back eventually, and when we moved back, we all moved back to Plainfield, New Jersey. In Plainfield, we all lived in one house, and then little by little, everyone got their own places. But all moved back because my mom decided to move back.

KR: How come to Plainfield and not back to the Bronx or Passaic or Elizabeth?

EF: Well, to Plainfield because one of my sisters was living in Plainfield, so that was our point of reference. She already had a place. We needed a place to get to, so we all went to her place. We all moved in with her.

KR: You know me; I'm from there. Where in Plainfield did you live, if you remember?

EF: West 7th Street.

KR: I was born there.

EF: I think it was 505 West 7th street.

KR: Wow.

EF: It was a big white house that was three stories high. It had many rooms. We all moved there.

KR: Yes, I was born on that street.

EF: Yes. There's a laundromat right before Clinton Avenue.

KR: Wow. I did not know that, and I've known you for how long?

EF: It was a real big house. Yes, we moved there. But then the house was getting too big for us, and then everybody else got their own little place.

KR: But still in Plainfield?

EF: Still in Plainfield. Then, while I was living in Plainfield, my mom decided to move to Connecticut. So then my sister Rose and I, we got our own little place, in Plainfield still. That's when I started working at Raritan Valley Community College. That was in 1990.

KR: Before we get into that, because that's interesting when you guys moved back from Puerto Rico to move to Plainfield, you said you had a sister living there. Do you know her story? I'm assuming she's from the Bronx. How did she come all the way to Plainfield out of all the cities in New Jersey?

EF: I really don't know how she got to Plainfield because we were living in Puerto Rico back then. I think she probably knew somebody. She had a friend or somebody told her about Plainfield. That's how she got to Plainfield.

KR: Now, going back to Raritan Valley Community College, what position did you apply for?

EF: This is interesting because I had been trying to land a job, and when I saw this job posted, it was a grant-based position for three years. It was only for three years, and I applied for it. It was a secretary job to work with young high school kids, a program that RVCC will help them succeed in order to prepare them for college. I was just going to be the secretary there. So I applied for it, and they hired me. The interesting part there, which I have mentioned to you, Kevin, before that, when I started working at Raritan Valley Community College in 1990, there was only one other Latina or Latino employee working there, and she was the secretary of the president. She wasn't that noticeable because she was always up in the president's office; not too many people knew her. I consider myself, basically, the first Latina staff person at Raritan Valley Community College. There weren't a whole lot of Latino students there when I got there. Sometimes I felt as though they would look at me like, "She's Latina."

KR: Have you ever felt discriminated against or anything like that for being Puerto Rican?

EF: I don't think it was discrimination. I think people were interested in what I had to say. They probably found my accent funny, I guess, the same thing like when I was in Puerto Rico and people noticed that I had an American accent. Here, when I talk here, everybody notices that, "Oh, this girl is a Puerto Rican from New York." They notice my accent, which I don't notice. I don't think I have an accent, but everybody says I have an accent. At any rate, I think that people were just curious, like, "I wonder what she eats. I wonder what her family is like." Because Somerset County and Raritan Valley Community College was basically a white community. There weren't too many African Americans employed there either. Once that other secretary left, I was the only Latina there, including staff and faculty. As of today, I think there's only one Latino professor, a Puerto Rican professor at Raritan, as far as I know, and no Latino advisors.

KR: So after the secretary of the president left, you were like the Hispanic ...

EF: The only Hispanic person there.

KR: This was in 1990 when she left?

EF: 1990, '91, yes. The '90s.

KR: Going back to Raritan Valley Community College, did you work in other departments?

EF: I worked at Raritan Valley. It was supposed to be a three-year position, and I ended up working there for twenty-five years. In those twenty-five years, I worked in ten different departments. Then, a little after I started working there--I think it was one or two years later, probably two years later--well, they were looking for a secretary for the student activities department. I told my sister to apply, my sister Rose. She applied for that job, and she got the

job. She ended up being secretary of the president. She ended up being secretary of the vice president. Lo and behold, she's still there. I think she's now twenty-six, twenty-seven years.

KR: Wow.

EF: Yes, she's been there twenty-six years, I think, now, or twenty-seven. While we were there, there was a great need to help the Latino students. I don't know if you want me to talk about the Latino students. When they met us, they would come to our offices for help.

KR: Before you touch on that, what was your favorite or most fulfilling department that you remember working in of all the ten departments?

EF: I loved working for--my two favorite departments, I guess, would be Student Activities, and I liked working for the Dean of Multicultural Affairs. But I think Student Activities was one of my favorites because I was able to work more with the students and also with the different clubs, organizations. I loved working with those when I was an Administrative Assistant to the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs. We worked with the Student Activities division.

KR: Besides working at RVCC, were you involved in other activities with students or groups at the college?

EF: When I first started working there, of course, I worked with the grant program. Then I worked with career services. I remember once a girl coming in because she saw that they had so many clubs, for the African American students, the Christian fellowship club, etc. She was Hispanic, and she goes, "I wonder why they don't have a club for Hispanics?" Then I said, "Well, are there a lot of Hispanics?" I wasn't sure how many Hispanics. "Well, I have a lot of Hispanic friends." I said, "Well, I think you should check with Student Activities." So then they told her, "You need to get a signup sheet, and if you get at least ten students, Latino students that want to be in the club, once you get the Latino students, you need to get an advisor." So, she went around looking for an advisor, and lo and behold, being the only Latina at Raritan, she comes and she asks me if I was interested. I said, "Well, yes, what do I need to do?" So then she says, "Oh, you need to sign this form."

So we started the club with ten students, and we would meet every Tuesday and Thursday. Then, I remember, I said, "Okay. We can't call ourselves 'the Latino Club.' We need to get something catchy." So we voted on that, and this one girl said, "Why don't we call ourselves the Orgullo Latino Club?" I always remember the girl--I can't remember her name, but I can remember saying, "I think that's a cool name." So that was in 1993 that we started the Orgullo Latino Club, and it's still active. It's 2018, and it's been a strong club, and we won several awards. That's when Raritan Valley Community College, as a whole, got to learn more about the Latino culture, and not only Puerto Ricans but Ecuadorians, Colombians, Cubans, Peruvians, Paraguayos, Hondureños. We learned that there was even, at times, diversity among the Latinos, like our differences in our foods, different cultures, different religions, different holidays, and how we celebrate different things. We just bonded, and it was just an amazing club. It was an amazing club. OLC was the one who introduced Hispanic Heritage Month to RVCC.

KR: What did you guys do?

EF: Well, it was interesting because, at that time, my sister was already working at the college, so she and I actually were the ones that started it.

KR: Was she a co-advisor?

EF: Yes, we were co-advisors, and we used to do different events. We used to do fundraisers, and we did cultural trips. I remember taking them to Washington, DC, to see the Lincoln Memorial. A lot of these kids had never visited out of the state, and some of them didn't have papers, so they never dared to go out of the state or anything. That was their first time ever seeing things like that, and going into museums in Washington to see the holocaust museum [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum]. It was the best part of my job. In all the years that I worked at Raritan, I think what kept me at Raritan all those years was Orgullo Latino (OLC). Because that was my passion. I've always enjoyed working with the youth. I have thirty-something nephews and nieces, and I helped raise a lot of them. I never had kids of my own. My passion has always been working with young kids, getting them out of trouble, and that's what I enjoy the most.

KR: Can you talk to me a little bit about how you got them out of trouble with the club?

EF: With the club? Okay.

KR: Or just by you yourself.

EF: Well, I'm a strong person. I'm straightforward, and I call them as I see them. I remember once we were meeting in the club, and I remember this student saying, "I'm lucky that I'm here because my parents didn't want me to come to school. My parents wanted me just to graduate high school, and that was good enough." So then, we were talking, and then I asked, "Well, who told you?" He said, "Well, my friend told me to come to RVCC." So that's when I said, "Wouldn't it be great if we could set up a program that you guys could tell other kids from other high schools, other Latinos kids that are high-risk, about the college?" So, how are we going to do this? Then we said, "Yes, because nobody listens to their parents. Their parents could turn blue in their faces and tell them things, but they'll pay more attention to a friend, a buddy of theirs, than to their parents."

Then, that's when the CRECER program started. My sister and I thought of the name, and it was CRECER, the word *crecer*, which means to grow, but the acronym C-R-E-C-E-R stands for caring, reaching, educating, connecting, enriching, and reaping. That's where the CRECER program started, which started in 1996. That program was a one-day college experience. We would choose high schools. We first started with Bound Brook High School and North Plainfield high school. They chose fifteen Latino students, high-risk kids from each school, and we brought them to Raritan Valley. We bused them. We made t-shirts. We brought them in. We gave them breakfast. We gave them lunch. We had motivational speakers. Then our OLC students were their mentors. Our students would sit with them and tell them about their experiences. Then, from those fifteen students, the following year, we had more and more. It is

2018, and CRECER is still going strong. There's been times that we had over two-hundred high-risk from probably eight, ten high schools, different high schools, come and attend Raritan Valley's Orgullo Latino's CRECER program. Many of those students have come to RVCC the following semester, attended their college, and many of them have become successful.

KR: Do you know any that you remember personally that you can maybe speak briefly about that went to the CRECER program when they were in high school and then went to Raritan? Do you keep in contact with them now? What are they doing?

EF: Yes.

KR: Anybody that stands out.

EF: Well, there's one student. This one student always gets me emotional because he was so high-risk at high school.

KR: By "high-risk," what do you mean?

EF: High risk. He wasn't a well-behaved student. He wouldn't care about his studies. He was a Mexican student. He studied at North Plainfield High School, and he was not even allowed to march at graduation in his high school, but he decided, "Let me go to Raritan." No, there was a bus trip, a CRECER program bus trip. He wanted just to go on the bus trip, so he went to the bus trip, just a day off from school. There, he sat in the CRECER program, but then he decided to attend Raritan. The only reason he attended Raritan was because they were going to give him financial aid, and he would get that money. That's the only reason. So then he went to Raritan, and when he went to Raritan, he stumbled onto the Orgullo Latino Club meeting, OLC. He stumbled there and decided to join. He saw that we were having fun and whatever, and he made friends there. But all he wanted to do was to hang out and hang out until one day, he met one of the girls that had attended the CRECER program before--her name was Candy. Well, she showed him some of her artwork. He noticed that she was doing some artwork, and she said that that was her major. Then he goes, "Oh, I like to draw." So then she started talking to him, and he started getting more interested in the artwork.

So he always attended the meetings. I remember one time--every year, Student Activities always gave out awards. He always attended the meetings. I nominated him to be student of the year of all the different clubs. You would nominate them, hoping that they win, but they would not always win. So I remember the day of the awards banquet, he didn't attend. But that day, they said, "Okay, so the winner of this year's student award goes to," and they named him. They mentioned his name. He wasn't there, but then I texted him and showed him the award that he got. He came to my office to pick up the award. This was a tough kid. He thought he was all that; he was really macho. I remember him sitting in my office, and he started crying. He goes, "I never won anything in my life." That's when he told me that he didn't even march at graduation because they didn't let him march. I said, "But your parents must be proud of you." "No, my parents don't want me to come to college. I come to college to get out of my house because my father just wants me to be a landscaper like every other Mexican. That's what he does, and I don't want to do that. I just want to get out of the house. That's the only reason I

came to Raritan." Now, he was studying graphic design. Then, a couple of weeks later, he comes to me and says, "Next year, I graduate." I think that was one of the happiest days of my life because he was not interested in school at all, and he graduated and he got accepted into a school of the Art Institute of Chicago. But then he couldn't afford it. He started there, but then he decided to come back to New Jersey and finish at William Paterson University, where he got his bachelor's degree. I have him on my Facebook and I haven't been in contact with him lately, but I know that he's doing what he wants to do.

KR: I'm sure he's very grateful.

EF: Yes. I keep all these students on my Facebook, and I try to keep in touch with them as much as possible. But there are so many, and this is only one of so many stories about this CRECER program and Orgullo Latino, and students mentoring other students, their peers. We have--what's her name from Bridgewater, Nicole. She said that she just wanted to graduate from high school, and a couple of years ago, she graduated from Rutgers after she had finished at Raritan. There's so many that have gone to NJIT [New Jersey Institute of Technology], Rutgers Business School, and are now working in Manhattan with big accounting firms. That was my passion, and it's still my passion, and that's why I always keep in touch with them.

KR: From the club starting in 1993 and the CRECER program starting in '96--with the CRECER program, you said you have motivational speakers. Can you give a brief list that anybody that stands out from all the years that you were there?

EF: Well, I remember the first motivational speaker we had for the CRECER program was our former president back in '96. His name was Cary Israel.

KR: President of the club or the school?

EF: The president of the college. He was awesome. In my book, he's the best president that we've ever had. I still keep in contact with him. He helped mentor a lot of these students, like the student who was our first president of the club. His name was Eddy Mayen. Eddy Mayen actually worked with the governor's office. I'm not sure if he's still there, but he's had his own businesses, too. He worked closely with Chris Christie, Governor Christie. We also had New Jersey Senator Teresa Ruiz speak to our students at one of our CRECER programs. There were a couple of years, and then we had Lisa Matos, journalist and reporter. She's from Channel 11 News, [and] she's still there. She actually lives in Plainfield.

KR: Wow.

EF: She came once to speak at the CRECER program. She was awesome, too. She gives the news on Channel 11 WPIX news, and she came. Let's see. Right off the top of my head, I can't remember, but we did have great speakers come. Not only that but sometimes--we didn't have to get these big popular famous people. We would bring back students like Sam Palacios. He was one of the Orgullo Latino students.

KR: Who was he?

EF: Actually, he didn't have papers while he was at Raritan Valley Community College, and even after he went to Rutgers Business School, he still didn't have papers.

KR: Did he come to the CRECER program when he was in high school, or was he a member of the club?

EF: No, because he was from Plainfield High School. We could only invite people from the county. Plainfield High School is from Middlesex County.

KR: Union County.

EF: Yes, from Union County. When he was at Raritan, he was president of Orgullo Latino, and he paid his way, all Raritan Valley, because he didn't have money. He was undocumented. After that, he got accepted at Rutgers Business School, and he paid his way all the way until he graduated from there. Now he's working at Ernst and Young accounting firm in New York City. Since then, he's been married. He's living the American Dream. We have brought him back, and he has spoken to our high school students from the CRECER program and motivated them. He's always available. He's always available. Even his sister came from Mexico to study at Raritan, and she became president of Orgullo Latino. She's another one. All these kids, they're not kids anymore; they're adults, but they're all like my kids, and I still keep in contact with them. They have incredible stories. I could write a book of all these stories, these success stories.

KR: I was part of the club as well, and I know how important it is. Besides CRECER, what other events or activities did the club do?

EF: Well, the first time that Hispanic Heritage Month was ever celebrated at Raritan Valley Community College was because of Orgullo Latino Club celebrated it. That was the first time that anybody had ever celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month at Raritan. Not only that, the CRECER program discovered that there were a lot of undocumented high school kids that didn't dare attend Raritan because they weren't going to get financial aid money for the school and had the impression they were not allowed to attend college.

KR: Like four-year schools?

EF: To study at any school and to pay their tuition. That was a hardship on them. So one of the projects that Orgullo Latino worked on was the CRECER scholarship program. I remember that was when my other sister Maggie used to work at the college. She started that component of the CRECER program. So we would do fundraisers to raise money to offer scholarships to CRECER students. They would have to write an essay, and they would have to get recommendation letters. Then OLC would choose which students would get the scholarship, depending on how much money we had raised that year. They would get four-hundred, five-hundred-dollar scholarships, or two-hundred, anything to help them. They would then come to Raritan. We always tried to choose the undocumented students and/or those with the most need.

KR: Of course. Starting off, you said it was fifteen students from North Plainfield High School and fifteen from Bound Brook. But then, at one point, you had, at the most, more than two-hundred students. What other high schools in Somerset and Hunterdon County do you remember that would come to the program?

EF: We had Hunterdon Central, which is in Flemington; Bound Brook; Hillsborough; North Plainfield; Somerset Tech; Franklin; and Manville.

KR: How did it increase? Did they reach out to you, or did you guys reach out to them to get more Latino students?

EF: The interesting thing with the CRECER program, we created it as a pilot, not knowing it would succeed. It was only supposed to be a one-day thing. We didn't think it was going to last this long. I remember back then, the Dean of Students, Nancy Jordan, a week after we did the first CRECER program, had a visit from the superintendent of schools and the principals of North Plainfield and Bound Brook High Schools. They came to visit her, and she called me to her office and she told me, "Eva, you need to meet these people." She then introduced me to them, and she says, "Eva is the adviser for Orgullo Latino and is responsible for the CRECER program." That was back in '96. The principal of North Plainfield High School said that there were high-risk kids who attended CRECER. He said, "I want to thank whoever was responsible for the program that you guys had last week because the kids that went were really high risk. When they came back from the CRECER program, they immediately went to the career services counselor, and they asked what do they need to do to get to college. This was really shocking to us, and we just wanted to know how we could help."

We told them, "We funded this ourselves. The students put in the money for the busing and everything. We're just doing it because we want to help these Latinos that are high risk. We want them to get educated." They were so impressed. I don't know if I still have that letter that they had written me, but that was payment for itself, just for them to realize that there was a change. That's when we said, "Okay, you know what? We're going to do this bigger and better," and that's when Dean Nancy Jordan really helped us fund this. She made sure that Student Activities would pay for the busing and to make sure that these kids would come for this one-day experience. She was a great help to us because she would make sure that RVCC would pay for this, not only fundraising, but that they would pay the bulk of it. President Cary Israel also assisted in funding CRECER. Thank God it's still going on. I'm so proud. I have kept every t-shirt from every CRECER program.

KR: Like I said, besides the CRECER program, what other events did you guys do?

EF: Besides Hispanic Heritage Month, and we did a lot of different events. We would do different dances. There was a lot of fundraising. Almost all of our events were fundraising, and basically, it was all for the CRECER program. We would do dances for Halloween or for the Cinco de Mayo celebration. Then when I started working in the Multicultural Affairs office, we did a lot of different events. We would bring in speakers. We once brought in Edwin Pagán Bonilla. He worked for the legislation in Puerto Rico, and he was in favor of making Puerto Rico the 51st state. He brought up a very controversial speech because he talked about Puerto

Rico being the "Apartheid" of this generation. It was very well attended, and there was some controversy with some people, but he backed it up. He backed up his information.

KR: Maybe you could speak a little bit about the *Proyecto Paz* program because I actually thought that it was, in addition to CRECER, very moving.

EF: "*Proyecto Paz*" (Peace Project) was a great project. It was OLC's holiday event. We went caroling to the hospital. OLC would buy holiday cards. The students would sign them all and we just used to write it was from the Orgullo Latino, wishing them happy holidays. We purchased beautiful poinsettias and, at times, we used to get them these little angels and then we would go Christmas caroling to the hospital to bring some joy to the elderly and terminally-ill patients. They would cry with joy all the time.

KR: Which hospital?

EF: We went to Hunterdon Medical Center in Flemington. We would go up and down the hallways, caroling to these people that probably didn't have too many days left to live. Their families weren't even visiting them. That was so fulfilling and so much fun. Sometimes they used to call us into their rooms, and they would tell us that they liked the song *Silent Night*, and we would sing *Silent Night*. They would be crying, and we would give them those poinsettias and angels with the card. They would just bless us. Then, at one point, we added another piece to that *Proyecto Paz* because then we were thinking, "Okay, we're doing that for Hunterdon County. Now let's see what we could do for Somerset County."

We decided to do a collection for the homeless shelter in Somerville, New Jersey, "The Agape House." OLC collected so much stuff. We began in the fall semester all the way through the month of December. Then, OLC students took all those boxes full of clothes, blankets, socks, toys, and sundries to the Agape House.

Everyone and anyone would donate. We would put boxes out around the college, and people would just drop in their donations, either toys for the kids, blankets, gloves, hats. Once, we tried to do a coat drive, too. We would have boxes and boxes, and we would do this on a day off. The students from Orgullo Latino would get in their cars, and we would all meet up at the Agape House. Then we would go, and we would take these boxes full of all this good stuff with them, and they would be so surprised. Then, that same day, either right after the Agape house or right after the Hunterdon Medical Center, then we would drive to Flemington, and we would do the caroling. After we did those things, we would have our holiday lunch or whatever at a restaurant. We ended the year in a great way.

KR: A lot of these events were a tradition, right? You did it year after year.

EF: It was tradition, and everybody looked forward to it. The people at the hospital would call me up, and they would say, "So what day are you guys coming?"

KR: So they expected you guys?

EF: Yes. They always expected us to go, and it was great. We were all dressed in holiday colors, and we would carol. Not all of us could sing. Not all of us could carry a tune, but hey, they enjoyed it. At least we tried.

KR: I'm sure it was the thought that counted.

EF: We got an "A" for effort. It was great. It would always bring so much joy to the patients and to us.

KR: Now, still on the club, but not so much the events--years after you guys started Orgullo Latino club in '93--because a lot of these events--it sounds like being involved and doing positive stuff for the community and for themselves. Did you ever have students ever reach out to you or maybe want to speak to the club, or a thank you? They wanted to touch base on their success based on being in your club, or going to your events, things like that? Have you ever had students say thank you for the events or for the club? How has Orgullo Latino contributed to former OLC students' success, if anyone has ever told you, or maybe with connections?

EF: Well, the students have always come back and told me individually. I've had students that, when they found out that I decided to retire--when I decided to retire in 2015, after twenty-five years at Raritan, a lot of them were upset. I have them all on my Facebook, and I always try to check to see what they're doing, if they are posting anything, even though Facebook now, somehow, is a little outdated because now they're going to Snapchat or Instagram or whatnot. But I always try to keep up with them. Yes, I have students--just today, I met up with Laura and you, Kevin, and we went for breakfast. So we're there at eight o'clock in the morning. We get out of there almost at 12:30, almost lunchtime. We were just chitchatting because we had so much to catch up on, "So what are you guys doing? When are you guys graduating? What are you going to do after graduation?" It's like mother hen, trying to make sure that they're going in the right direction. Then yesterday, Mark messaged me on Facebook that he wants to get together. That's another one that I need to check up on, so many, so little time, at times.

I was telling Kevin I was in Puerto Rico recently. I go into this bakery, this nice bakery in Puerto Rico. Like I do everywhere I go, I check in, and I take a picture where I am. Then one of my former students from 2002-2003, she writes, "*Gracias por patrocinarnos*. Thanks for coming to my business, giving us your business." I tell her, "What? You own this place, you and Brahiam?" Because they were students of mine in Orgullo Latino, and they said, "Oh, yes. We own this place." I said, "Oh, my God." I hadn't seen them in ten years. I told them, "I need to meet up with you," and we set up a time. We just hugged so tight. I was so happy to see Brahiam. Mariela and Brahiam actually met in the Orgullo Latino Club. Brahiam transferred to Miami to the University of Miami, and Mariela transferred to the University in Puerto Rico. Before they left, they had gotten engaged. After they graduated, they had gotten married. So when I saw Mariela in Puerto Rico, at their bakery, I told her, "Oh, my God!" We're in the middle of the business, and she's telling everybody in the business, "If it wasn't for her, I would have never met Brahiam, I would have never had my two kids." She was just telling everybody how Orgullo Latino was what brought them together. I said, "Well, yes. I guess Orgullo Latino makes love connections as well." It was so great. I was so proud of their business, and it's booming. Oh, my God, a total success.

KR: When you started the club in the '93, compared to your last days in 2015, how had it grown? For example, has it been a diversity of different Hispanic countries? Also, is the club Hispanic-based only, like only if you're Hispanic, you can join?

EF: No. What started happening with Orgullo Latino--eventually, it was the club to be in, to be a member of. I don't know who has those awards, but we won "club of the year" so many times. I have my awards, a few "adviser of the year" awards, that I won year after year. It was the club to be in, and we started having members of all kinds. We had Muslim, Black and white students. We had people that didn't speak any Spanish, and there were times we had over fifty members. Then, even when we had the CRECER program, they were there supporting OLC. One thing that I enjoyed about the CRECER program, which I think helped a lot of my students, was that the CRECER program was run totally by the students. A lot of these students were shy.

KR: What do you mean?

EF: What I mean--they're running the CRECER. First of all, they would come up with the theme, and then they would come up with the design of the t-shirt. Then, not only that, they were the ones that were up in the podium all the time. They were the ones that were going to introduce the guest speaker. They were the ones that were going to introduce the President of the college. They were the ones that introduced the Dean of Students. So even though they were shy, we would pair them up two and two; just like the Oscars, we would put two people on stage. Most of the time, it was a girl and guy, and they would be shaking like a leaf. They were shaking, but I had written up the script, that way they had the script right in front of them. Eventually, their shyness and their fear of speaking in public would go away. Some would actually ad-lib their speeches. Many of them would not speak in the club. After a couple of years doing the CRECER program, you couldn't shut them up. They always wanted to be at the mic and they always wanted to speak, and they improved their speaking skills.

KR: Public speaking.

EF: To tell you the truth, I'm not one to like to speak in public. I'm not the best speaker, but I wanted them to improve on their skills. They would love it because then they realized, "Well, I'm just talking to a bunch of young kids from high school, and they're just like me. They're Latinos like me, young kids like me." When they would see that, they would feel so comfortable. I've always been so proud of my students.

KR: Besides the Orgullo Latino Club, you also mentioned you liked working in the office of Multicultural Affairs. When you were in that department, what events did you guys do? What did you find most fulfilling?

EF: Well, we did a lot of cultural events. We did a lot of social issues. I remember Trayvon.

KR: Trayvon Martin? [Editor's Note: In 2012, Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in a gated community in Sanford, Florida,

where Zimmerman lived, and Martin was visiting relatives. Zimmerman was acquitted on all charges, and protests were held throughout the country in response to the decision.]

EF: Trayvon Martin. We did a program about that. We had some lawyers and people speak about it, their opinions. We also had programs like the one on Haiti, how the people in the Dominican Republic and Haiti share this big same island, but yet, they are divided. One group thinks they're better than the other. Also, every time there was some social issue going on, we would have a program to discuss these issues. We also once showed that film of Mr. Jose Antonio Vargas, the undocumented American from the Philippines. He is a Filipino filmmaker, journalist and activist, who has chronicled his experience being raised and living in the United States as an undocumented immigrant in his writing and a film titled *Documented*. Actually, we saw him at Rutgers.

KR: Can you speak briefly on what his story was about?

EF: His story? Well, he came here as a kid with his grandparents or his parents. He never thought that he was an [undocumented] immigrant because nobody ever told him he was "illegal," so when he went to get his driver's license, or he needed to show them his identity, his passport, or birth certificate, it showed that he was an illegal alien. So he wasn't able to get a driver's license. But then he had a mentor in college because he went as far as getting his master's, and he had a mentor that helped him. He still is undocumented. He calls himself the "undocumented American." Kevin and I went to see him at Rutgers when he spoke. I remember we did a program--but since RVCC couldn't afford him, we just showed his film, and then we had a discussion. We would have a lot of discussions like that, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed very much the office of Multicultural Affairs. We had great programs. I'm trying to think of other programs.

KR: So wrapping up on your experience at RVCC, if you have one moment or one experience, besides the guy graduating from North Plainfield, [that] made you say, "I love my job," something very fulfilling, like maybe your club or something your work has done to impact students or faculty.

EF: Let me see.

KR: It doesn't have to be the most ...

EF: There's so many because it's twenty-five years. Now I have to go through those twenty-five years and think of one story, one thing.

KR: Any one last experience you want to share [about] Raritan, good or bad.

EF: Well, one other experience, one other story that I'd like to share is [about] this one student. She had come from Mexico, and she was president of the student organization of Orgullo Latino. She was taking computer classes. One day, she comes to my office, running in and out. She goes, "I got to go because I'm taking a test, and it's going to take me all day," blah, blah, blah. So she leaves, and then she comes back afterward, "I'll be back." She came back to my office,

and I said, "What's going on?" What kind of test are you taking?" She didn't want to tell me. I said, "It's taking you all day? What kind of test?" So she calls me over, and then she tells me, "I'm taking my GED [General Educational Development] test." I said, "You don't have a high school diploma?" She starts crying, and she tells me that nobody in her family knows this and she told me not to tell anybody. I said, "But why don't you--?" She starts crying, and she starts telling me in Spanish, "*Es que no me entienden.*" She said, "They don't understand me. Eva, my family doesn't get me. They don't get me. They don't understand what I went through in Mexico."

She starts crying and crying, and I just hug her. She goes on, "It's like I'm a loser. I didn't get my high school diploma." I said, "You're not a loser because this is not an easy test for you to take. To tell you the truth, I think if I was to take that GED test, I don't think I would pass it." Then she starts crying, and I tell her, "Listen, you're going to pass this test because you are so smart." She goes on, "Eva, if I don't pass it, I'm going to have to quit college because this is my last chance." I said, "You won't quit college. As a matter of fact, when you pass that test, as soon as you get your scores, I need you to text me." She started crying, and I wipe her tears. I tell her, "Just go concentrate on the test; you're going to pass it." She hadn't told anybody, only me, and then I was in the middle of a meeting, I remember, I get the text that she passed it. I think that was like another one of the happiest days of my life. Then, I just told her, "Let's go out dinner." I think it was dinner; it was after work. We went, and we had some Mexican food. She ended up not only getting her GED, but she graduated from RVCC. And not only did she graduate from RVCC, but she was accepted into NJIT and she graduated from NJIT. She's working in her field in a big corporation right now, and I'm so proud of her.

KR: You definitely feel like the club and events have had a huge contribution to student success.

EF: Definitely. The club and having them feel as though they could take ownership of programs like the CRECER program, and just like I motivate them, they could motivate other kids. It's just passing it forward. Especially as Latinos, we need to prove ourselves even more than everybody else and every other American here in the United States, especially nowadays. We have to really prepare ourselves. We have to prepare these young kids and motivate them to continue to let them know that nobody or anything could take away what they have inside of them, their knowledge. Whether you're documented or undocumented, you deserve to learn, to have an education, and reach your dreams. Go for your dreams.

KR: What has your life been like after RVCC?

EF: After RVCC, I've done a few volunteer stuff at my church I attend. I attend a church in Sayreville, a non-denominational church; and I had a couple of temp jobs just to keep myself busy. In two days, it will be a year when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. When Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, I felt helpless because I was here. I said, "How could I help?" Then I decided--I said, "Let me put in for a job." I go to USAjob and apply to FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] to see how I could help them. I applied as soon as that hurricane hit, and they declared it a disaster. So I went on a planned trip. I had a cruise to Cuba. That was in October. The Monday after I got back from the cruise, I got a call from FEMA, telling me that they got my application and they would like to interview me.

So I thought it was a scam because I'd been getting all these scam calls. I said, "Okay. So when should I interview?" Like, "Yeah, right?" So he goes on, "Well, Thursday or Friday, is it okay?" I said, "Yes. So, where do I go?" Then he says, "Well, the Sheraton Hotel at one o'clock is okay?" I said, "Okay. Put me for Friday." I said, "Okay. So which Sheraton do I go?" Because it was a 202 area code, so I said, "The one in New York, or the one in Washington, DC? Which Sheraton do I go to?" He said, "Oh, the one in San Juan." I say, "San Juan, Puerto Rico?" He says, "Yes."

So I had to talk to my family. I said, "They called me from FEMA. I really want to do this. I'm not doing anything here now." So I went. I went to Puerto Rico, and it was only for an interview, and they hired me, but I didn't start immediately. I started working for FEMA in January. This was in October. But in between, I had friends and family members sending me boxes, care boxes. Between my sisters that live in Puerto Rico, who I was living with over there, we distributed batteries, lights, canned goods, food, *mosquiteros* (mosquito net), and a whole bunch of much needed stuff. We went to the needy people that we could reach out to.

KR: Can you describe the situation for the needy people? You were actually there. How was the experience?

EF: It was bad. I mean, all these light poles. When I went to Puerto Rico, I think about ninety to ninety-five percent of the island was without power. Then one of my sisters that lives in the house that my biological father used to own, she lived there all her life. Well, she lost power and water since [Hurricane] Irma, which was in the beginning of September [2017]. She didn't get that back [until it was] close to March 2018. So she was living all those months without water and light. It was horrible. The light poles--no streetlights, and drivers in Puerto Rico are crazy enough with the signal lights and the street lights. Imagine without the streetlights. It was crazy. You were taking life into your own hands when you went driving in Puerto Rico.

KR: What part of Puerto Rico did you go too?

EF: I was staying in the San Juan Area, which was the metropolitan area. So it wasn't as bad as where my family lives in Las Piedras. In Humacao, some of the homes--in the country, it was worse. Where my sister lives in Rio Piedras, you would have to be crossing all these wires, these light posts that were laying across the street. You would have to be careful because it's all rural areas, all these tiny roads, curvy roads, and it was awful. It was awful driving over there. Then January was when I finally started working for FEMA at the call center, and I worked there until August. It was only supposed to be for 120 days, and then they extended me. It was really rewarding, but it was tough at times. At times, getting those calls, and some of these calls were suicide calls, and I had not only women but men crying.

KR: What was one of the toughest calls you remember?

EF: There was this one guy. He was very sick, and his house only had the blue tarp on top, the FEMA tarps that they put when they lost their roofs. The guy was sleeping in the corner of his room to try to avoid getting wet because it still leaked with the rain. The house would leak, and

he had this illness that he needed a generator. He had no power. He kept on telling me, "I really need this generator." I said, "Well, let me check your case." Then I'm checking his case, and he's crying on the phone. I'm checking his case. At first, he told me, "But I already sent my medical information, doctor's note, etc.," because in order to get a generator, you need to have a medical excuse note and he had sent his. I said, "Well, I see that you sent your medical note from your doctor, but you need to purchase the generator, and we will reimburse you." He starts crying, "I don't have any money. I don't have any family." He starts crying on the phone. He says, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm trying my best to stay alive." He's crying. So I just start breathing, and I put him on hold. I said, "Let me see what I could do. Let me talk to my supervisor."

So when I talk to my supervisor, she tells me, "Well, he needs to purchase it and then turn in his receipt if he already sent his doctor note." I said, "Yeah, I told him that, but the guy doesn't have any money." She says, "Well, you don't know that." She's telling me, "Well, you don't know that." I said, "Listen, we're here to help them, and seriously, I really feel that he needs help." I'm getting all shaky and getting upset with her. She says, "Well, that's how it is." I said, "But I'm sure there's some exception to the rules. There has to be some exception. Who can I talk to that's above you?" I told her like that. There was a lady that was there from Virginia, and I said, "Can I talk to her?" So then I called the lady over, and I tell her. I said, "Listen, this man really needs help." I'm almost crying, but I'm holding back because the man is very sick and he needs help. "My supervisor says that we couldn't." So the lady saw my desperation--the lady from Virginia saw my desperation. She goes, "Eva, do me a favor. Send me an email, and before the end of the week, he'll have his generator." I said, "Thank you so much." I look at my supervisor, and I said, "I knew there had to be something we could do."

Then I went back to the guy, and the guy was still crying on the phone. I told him, "*Mira, señor*, I spoke with the administrator, and they're going to get you a generator before the end of the week. If you don't get the generator, call us back because I'm documenting all this on your file, and it should be on your file. Whoever gets the call, they should know that you should be getting a generator." That man, then he was just crying for joy. He was just so happy we were going to get him the generator. But that was one of the many stories. Many times after I just finished a call, I had to just go to the bathroom and cry it out, to come back and take another call. It was hard. It was hard.

KR: It sounds very traumatizing.

EF: It was. But then, calls like that were so fulfilling. Sometimes I couldn't help the people. I think it was even God himself that would put words in my mouth to console them, and they would tell me, "I know that you can't do this and that you're not the one that decides, but you have given me a little hope." That's all I needed to do was just give them a little hope. Deep down inside my mind, I would just pray. I would just pray, "God, help this person. Help this eighty-year-old lady that's living by herself that lost everything." There were so many cases like that. But I had to come back because I had my home here. I had my family here. I was paying a mortgage on the house that I'm not living in. But I'm glad to be home, and I'm glad that I had that experience. In the meantime, I'm just waiting to hear from--I put in to become a reservist for

FEMA, and it's just a matter of waiting to see if they want me. But at this time, they have those positions frozen.

KR: How long were you there in Puerto Rico? How many months or years?

EF: Seven months for FEMA, but I was there for nine months because, even before FEMA, I was doing stuff--taking care packages, and boxes, and batteries, and lights, and battery-operated fans, and canned goods, and stuff like that, too.

KR: From the time that you got there until the time you left, had the situation gotten better or worse in Puerto Rico?

EF: Things have gotten better. Because once they got power, it was a little better. But it's just a matter of time. I think the biggest problem there for people to get funded is that they didn't have ownership documentation. In order to give funds, federal funds, you need to prove that you're the owner of the home or the land. A lot of people in Puerto Rico, their parents or grandparents had a piece of land, and said, "Here, take this land. Divide it among yourselves and do whatever you want." Sometimes they never even had a title, a deed to their property. So they never registered their property. So now, when they need to show proof that they're the owners, it's hard, and you have to go by the criteria. That was difficult.

KR: Well, I don't have any more questions, but if there's any last experience or saying that you want to conclude with, or we could just end it right here. Actually, before we get into that--I'm sorry. This one isn't written down, but from the time that you came to Flemington from Plainfield, how has the Hispanic population changed, if at all?

EF: Well, there's so many more Latinos going to school now here. It's grown. Here in Flemington, I think we were the first Latinos. We bought this house in 1999. I think when we moved here, it was like, "There goes the neighborhood." But there's a few Latinos more here in Flemington. I remember when we first moved here, they used to stop me all the time, whenever they used to see my Puerto Rican flag in my rearview mirror.

KR: The police?

EF: Yes. They have stopped me a couple of times, and they would give me these warnings.

KR: Warnings for?

EF: They say you're not supposed to have anything disturbing your sight in your rearview mirror.

KR: Oh, like disturbing the windshield. Obstruction of windshield, I think it's called.

EF: Obstruction of view. I remember one cop telling me, "You have to remove that thing out of there. That's obstruction." I said, "That thing is my Puerto Rican flag. That's what it is." He said, "Well, you have to remove that." I said, "Oh, okay. So how about all the people that

dangle their air fresheners and their crucifix and their rosary beads on there. Do you stop those people?" I told him like that. He just looked at me and said, "Well, please take it down. I'll just consider it a warning." I took it down, but I still put it back up. Right now, I don't have it. I don't have one, but I drove around a lot with it, and they stopped me a couple of times. So to avoid this continuous nuisance, I took it down.

KR: The last question: from the time you started at RVCC in '93, compared your retirement in 2015, how has the Latino or Hispanic population changed, if at all?

EF: At Raritan?

KR: Yes, workers and students.

EF: Well, workers, I believe they still only have one Latina faculty member, right? Isabel Gutierrez, I think she was the only ...

KR: Yes, she was my psychology professor.

EF: Yes, and I think she's the only Latina there as a professor. I don't think they have any more Latina professors.

KR: What about any [staff], people that work in the offices?

EF: Yes, they have a couple more but still no Latino advisor or counselor.

KR: More than when you started?

EF: Yes. Because I was the only one, basically, when I started. Then I brought my sisters. I brought my sister Rose, and then I brought my sister Maggie. I also had a niece, Ericka Diaz, who worked in enrollment services and now works at Rutgers.

KR: What about in terms of students from '96, from the club, all the way to 2015?

EF: There's a whole lot more students because I think there's a whole lot more Latinos. The demographics of Somerset County and Hunterdon County are changing. We're here. We're here to stay, the Latinos. We're going to make the best of it. We're going to get educated, and we're going to be part of the American dream, whether they like it or not. That's it. I think that's what we need to do. We just need to keep educating Latinos, and that's basically it. Basically, that would be my closing argument.

KR: Yes. That's a good choice of words.

EF: We need to promote more that Latinos get educated and become great businessmen and women.

KR: And businesswomen, too.

EF: We need people. We are smart people. We are smart people. We just need to get our priorities straight, and we need to, I guess, have more faith in ourselves. I think that's sometimes what we lack, and sometimes we may take time and we want to take the easy way out. I don't think we should. We see people who come from India. They come here, and they prosper. They hustle, and they get educated. They're very smart people. We're smart people. We could do the same. We shouldn't be afraid of anything. We shouldn't start stereotyping ourselves. It's like when we say, "We always get late everywhere. That's Puerto Rican time. That's Latino time." Why do we have to be associated with something negative, as little as being late? "Yeah, don't count on him. He's Latino. He'll be here late." That's only a minority thing. We should never connect anything negative with ourselves and put ourselves down. Our kids listen to that. We say that because our parents used to say that. They say it probably because their parents used to say it. So we just need to stop all that nonsense. The negativity stops with us!

KR: Okay.

EF: Anyway, I thank you, Kevin, for doing this. I am so proud of the man you've become. Keep up the good work.

KR: No, thank you for your time. Years down the line, decades down the line, I will definitely keep this interview very close to me.

EF: Well, I hope I answered all your questions.

KR: You did.

EF: Thank you again.

KR: I think you did a really good job. Thank you, Eva.

EF: Okay. You're welcome, Kevin.

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Transcribed by Kevin Rosero
Reviewed by Carie Rael
Reviewed by Molly Graham
Reviewed by Eva Fontanez 10/15/2020
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 11/4/2020