

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMIE GONZALEZ

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Samantha Bravo: This begins an interview with Jamie Gonzalez in Pennsauken, New Jersey, on November 14, 2021, by Samantha Bravo. Thank you for doing this oral history interview. Could you tell me where and when you were born?

Jamie Gonzalez: Sure. I was born in Puerto Rico, the town of Aguadilla, June the 21st, 1962.

SB: When did you first come to live in New Jersey?

JG: Six months after I was born in 1962. So, it was probably 1963.

SB: And how?

JG: Our parents decided to move to New Jersey.

SB: Do you know why your family moved to Camden, New Jersey?

JG: No, I really don't. I never asked.

SB: What was it like growing up in Camden?

JG: As a kid, it was really nice to be growing up in Camden. We didn't have a lot to do, but we had a lot of places to go to at the time. There were a lot of stores in Camden that I could remember as a child. The streets and everything were beautiful when I was a kid until 1979, maybe '80, in that area. I think they had the riots, or stores started moving out when they built the malls. That's where you could say things start going downhill in Camden.

SB: Have you noticed any changes in Camden as you got older?

JG: Not really. When I was a kid, we looked to do things as kids out in the streets, playing and this and that. I'm trying to remember so far back. Can we skip that and come back?

SB: You talked about crimes. Has that affected you?

JG: No, not really. Basically, crimes didn't bother us too much. Mind your business and always had curfews when we were young. My parents and the neighborhood parents looked after each other's kids. As children at that time, we never called our neighbors by their first name; we always called them by their last name as a [form of] respect. That was one good thing. When I was a child, we showed respect first, not like kids growing up nowadays, that they basically don't have a lot of respect for older people. When I was being raised, we were always--when we got in trouble, our neighbors will say something to us. Basically, we had to put our heads down and weren't allowed to speak back to older people. So, I kind of miss that. In these years now, as an older person, I can sit back and reflect on that. Kids nowadays don't have respect for older people.

SB: What was your childhood like?

JG: Well, my mother always made us go to school, always made sure we got an education. We always had to walk to school, no bus at that time. Kids nowadays get bused to school and bused home. We had to walk to school and walk home. Childhood was pretty good. Like I said earlier, we had friends, and we had to respect each other because our parents wanted us to grow and learn from each other.

SB: What were you like in high school?

JG: Quiet. I was always the quiet one in high school--just sit back and listen and try to do the best I can in high school. I didn't graduate from high school. I dropped out going into my twelfth grade year, and it was very difficult. I really wanted to, but I couldn't do it for one reason. My father passed away around that time.

SB: How were things after your father passed away?

JG: It was very difficult because my father was always a hard worker, and my mother had one job. She was a lunch aide in school for kids. All of a sudden, when my father passed away, she had to get a second job to help raise not only me but my other two younger sisters. Like I said, I was seventeen, maybe eighteen years old at the time, and going into my twelfth grade year. I dropped out to help my mom raise me and my sisters by working. I started working around that time, '78, maybe '79, when my father passed away, working in the scrapyards that were only a couple blocks away from where I was being raised. It was tough because I didn't graduate, didn't really get to do other things that I really wanted to do--just [had] to worry about helping my mother out to give us a roof over our heads. I helped my mom to push my sisters to graduate high school and help them as much as I can.

SB: Where do you work now? Is it the scrapyards?

JG: Yes, I still work at the scrapyards, which they sold out to another scrapyards. I'm doing the same thing when I first started. I worked from the ground up to become a maintenance supervisor, and that's what I still do now, maintenance supervisor on heavy equipment, cranes, loaders, trucks, stuff like that. I learned a lot doing that over forty-something years in the scrap business. There's a lot of things that you think you don't see in the scrap that people throw away. You wonder why there's a scrapyards that takes recycling items. There's a lot of process that has to be done to recycling to make the environment cleaner. I think without recycling facilities, where's it going to go?

SB: What are some meaningful events that you experienced as a young man?

JG: Well, as a young man ...

SB: It could be school-related, just something that happened with your family, or anything like that.

JG: Well, probably when I became a man at a young age. Like I said, I started working when I was really young, have never stopped working--a person that hardly says no to nobody, always

helping someone out. It's the way I learned as a young man, still do the same thing. That is basically what I do, help people out, in my jobs, in the streets, everywhere.

SB: How did you meet my grandma?

JG: Wow. [laughter] Very interesting. It's kind of funny. I met your grandmother through my nephew about fourteen years ago. My nephew and his wife introduced me to your grandmother. Basically, yes, you could say it was a blind date because they set us up, and we hit it off from the get-go. We talked, and we liked each other. That's where it went. It took off, and I married her. She has three wonderful daughters, and I have three wonderful kids. Basically, we have six kids all together. I don't know how many grandkids and great-grandkids, but we're one big happy family.

SB: Could you tell me more about the blind date? What did you guys do?

JG: Well, start off with a blind date. [I] wanted to go to a little concert they had in Philadelphia, and I didn't want to go by myself. My nephew and his wife were going to go, and they invited me. Then, I said I didn't want to go. Then, they said, "Well, we've got someone who might want to go with you. We want to set you up." They called her up, and she said she didn't want to go; she wasn't in the mood of going. The last minute, she had changed her mind, and she decided to go. After we met, we sat down, we talked. She gave me her lifestyle, and I gave her my side of my life with our kids, and same thing with her kids. She had three kids, and I had three. We decided to go out for a couple more dates, and we hit it off. I got to meet her family. She got to meet my side of the family. You could say we hit it off, and it was great. I will not regret it.

SB: What made you realize that you wanted to marry my grandma?

JG: What made me realize? Well, the kindness that she does. She reminds me of myself. We love to help other people out. We're always doing things for family. She almost bends over backward to do things for someone. She does anything for her kids or grandkids. So, in the way she treated me and treated my kids, I noticed that she was a very, very good woman and very well-respected and joyful to be around.

SB: Tell me about the wedding.

JG: The wedding. That's a big one. Well, me and your grandmother lived together for about four years, and one of your aunts asked us when were we ever going to get married. I turned around, and I was joking at the time, I said, "Your grandmother never proposed to me, and if she was going to propose to me, she has to go out and get the rings." Joking. All of a sudden, she says she was going out one weekend with her daughter, and they showed up home with wedding rings. She says, "We're going to get married." I said, "We are?" She goes, "Yes." She went out and bought rings. I start laughing. It's kind of funny because I knew it was the right time because she bought the ring that I loved, and it fit perfectly. She was happy, and we decide to pick a date. She asked me to pick a date. I gave her a couple of dates, and she didn't like those dates. So, I turned around, and I said, "Well, you know what? It's going to be May 21st." She didn't like that date. Then, I turned around and said, "Well, it's going to be that date, or we won't

get married." We had a year to plan. She picked the date. We had a year to plan. We planned everything. It was only supposed to have been something small, and it turned out to be 150 people because your mother has a big family. Your grandmother has a big family, put it that way. It turned out really wonderful. We'd done everything. We planned for a year. We saved up money, and we had it catered. You know how your grandma is. We hired a caterer to cook and everything, but your grandma had to always cook something for her own wedding. She cooked the rice and everything else for it because she wanted it to be perfect. It was a very, very wonderful wedding, and everybody got to enjoy it. We just had a best man. The two little ones at the time were her nephew and her granddaughter, which were the ones that came out in the wedding, and it was my sister and her brother. That was it. We had in the hall with a priest, and we got married. I can say we are happy ever since.

SB: What caused you guys to move to Pennsauken?

JG: We lived at the other house, and we decided to move to Pennsauken after we fixed the other house on 27th Street, put a lot of money into it. I think it was time to move forward, get out of Camden, better ourselves, and it was starting to--me and your grandmother noticed that the neighborhood was starting to downsize. What I'm saying, downsize, is [it got] a little bad out in the street, so [we] decided to move out of Camden. I had a couple of words with neighbors about parking; they always kept blocking my driveway behind the house, and I couldn't get in. I couldn't get out. I had a couple of emergencies that I had to run out. I figured, "You know what? It's time to move out." We both lived our lives in Camden, most of our lives in Camden, and it was time for us to move forward and move out of Camden.

SB: How would you describe Pennsauken's population and environment?

JG: Pennsauken's population. Population is very--put it this way--good. We have good environment. They take care of the public. They have a lot of events around the holidays, even in the summertime. They really worry about their neighbors. I live on a nice quiet street. All year round, it's wonderful. I have kids that live on the same street; they respect people's property. We all help each other out. It's a nice clean town, very clean town. Trash is picked up. The trash company--[if you] dump stuff on the street, they shovel it up, make sure the street is clean. We have our snow removal, leaf removal. They have appliance removal. They have everything. For a nice little town, they do a lot of work for the community. They like their community to be involved in a lot of things.

SG: What has it been like as a Puerto Rican living in Camden?

JG: Living in Camden as a Puerto Rican wasn't that difficult. I think being raised around African Americans, American Italians, Asians, and people of that kind of race, we got to learn about each other's culture. We were really well respected. We respected their culture a lot. They respected us. We respected them. I can remember when I was a kid in Camden, Saturdays were days--everybody had marble steps, and it was Puerto Ricans, Italians, African Americans, like I said, different cultures, out there scrubbing the steps on a Saturday. It was pretty neat. You could sit back, you could remember that and say, "Look, all different kinds of cultures doing

the same thing that people think that they would never do as different races." It was pretty good. Can we take a break?

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SB: What has it been like as a Puerto Rican living in Pennsauken?

JG: Living in Pennsauken--not much different than Camden. It's just the next town over, which is a well-knit community, quiet. Everyone knows each other.

SB: What is your connection to Puerto Rico like?

JB: My connection to Puerto Rico, I have family over there, aunts and uncles, cousins. Usually, we'll talk on the phone. The last time I was there would be about eight, maybe ten years ago. I went with my wife. We went to visit them. We were there for two weeks. Beautiful island beaches. So much to do, not enough time to do it. I got to spend time with my cousins, aunts, and uncles. We went out. Me and my wife drove to different places on the islands to see different things, different towns. Every town just about has a little favorite food dish that they make. There were people there [who] could tell when you're not from the island. Something about people that come from different areas, other countries; when it comes to the island, they have a thing about--they recognize people that don't belong, don't live on the island, and they start asking you questions about where you're from and how is it. You explain it to them. They treat you very, very nice. They sit down and explain things about the island to you, the culture and things that go on, even bad things, where to watch out for, where to go. Really great. I love to go there. But unfortunately, for the last couple of years, we haven't been going there.

Like I said, I have aunts and cousins over there. I have a cousin that came to New Jersey, worked for a window company, learned how to make aluminum windows, and took what he learned to the island. He started his own business over in the island, making aluminum windows, doors, out of his garage. From there, he expanded that. He takes the ferry over to the Dominican Republic and has businesspeople call him over there to put windows and doors in. It's pretty neat that he took something that he learned in the United States and took it to his land and made a business out of it and moved on with it, and does pretty good. I have family [who] work in a stone quarry on the island, started off with my uncle, working there as a young kid. He had, with his wife, ten kids. Eight of them were boys; two of them were girls. About seven of the kids worked with my uncle, and they made a future there working at the quarry, running equipment--cranes, trucks. As a matter of fact, one of them has a dump truck that he hauls for the quarry to different places on the island to deliver stones. I have one cousin that runs the crane, and the other one runs loaders. It's kind of funny that my uncle started as low as them and worked [his] way up and became a supervisor, and his sons are working for him at this quarry. So, it's pretty interesting the way things happen over there. A lot of people follow the directions of their parents on jobs. Their father is a mechanic, so the kid will take that tradition and move it forward and become a mechanic or something better.

My aunt was always the housewife. My two cousins both are nurses for a hospital in their town. They made a good future for themselves on the island of Puerto Rico. Always go to see them,

and they welcome me with their arms open. This is how they are with the family, always wanting to know if the family's okay on the island and in the United States.

SB: Are there any places in Puerto Rico that you want to visit that you haven't visited yet?

JG: Usually, when we go, we don't go to a specific place, like San Juan. We go to see if there's something new there. Usually, what we do is--me and your grandmother travel around the edge of the islands, and we can see the beaches and the new stores and shops that are out there, where tourism goes. Usually, when we go, my family won't let us rent a hotel or motel. They won't let us stay in them. They want us to stay with them. We go there, and it's a big thing when people come from the United States over to the island; they like to have a little celebration. They cook, roast a pig, make food, and have a little get-together party that welcomes family members back home to the island. Sometimes, they take us to the beaches or lakes, and it's pretty nice. Do we have a favorite spot to go? Not really, because when we go there, we just basically spend our time with family members and get to see them in the short time that we have to spend there. We go to your grandmother's town where she was born, go back to see old folks and friends that she had back in her town. It brings back memories. We get to know them better. She came from a little area in Puerto Rico called Guanica, which has beautiful beaches. She spends more time tracking down friends that she went to school with or was in her neighborhood. She tracks them down. They sit back, and they talk about the good old times.

SB: What are your hobbies? What do you like to do for fun?

JG: What are my hobbies? Well, my hobby is, when I don't have nothing to do, I work around the house. I'm pretty good with my hands, carpentry. I'd done that when I was in the Camden house. I'd just redone the whole kitchen over there. [When I] moved in Pennsauken with your grandmother, I had to redo the kitchen over in the Pennsauken house. I'm pretty good with my hands. I do carpentry, electric, plumbing, and just about a little bit of everything. I like to stay busy in time off. Your family, even my family, have projects going on, and I come over to help them out. Carpentry is my hobby. I do things like that. Working on cars is another thing I do. I like to do things with my hands a lot, helping people out with working on their houses.

SB: What do you like to do in the summer?

JG: Well, as you know, I do have a jet ski. In the summer, I take the jet ski out. We go out to the lakes. This one special place we go is up in the Poconos. It has a beautiful lake up there. We go up. We have a picnic up there. We invite the whole family. We will go up there. We spend a day up there with the jet skis, get a lot of people. Friends that have jet skis, that's what made me go out and get one. Go up there and spend time with the family and take the kids, the grandkids, and everyone out on the back of the jet ski up and down the lakes and have a good time with them. I have good memories there. I always try to be safe on the water. But kids nowadays want to go faster and faster and faster. They holler in my ear, "Can you go faster? Can you go faster?" But I always try to be safe out there on the water. You got to respect the water. Other than that, I spend my time with the jet ski. At least once or two times, three times a month, I take it up there on the weekends with the family and friends when we have time to go up there. Hopefully, this year we can go more, even invite you to go.

SB: What have been your biggest challenges you faced in life?

JG: Biggest challenge I faced in life? Challenge is to never let my mother down. My challenge was to become a man when my father passed away at a young age. He died when he was forty-three. My challenge was to pass his age because he died of leukemia. It had me scared to make sure I didn't have it. Especially when my father passed away--he never [saw] me get married, never got to meet his first grandchild, or great-grandchild. Like I said, he passed away when he was forty-three. So, I'm happy that at least I got to meet my grandkids and my great-grandchild at the age of fifty-nine. You always have that in the back of your mind. Are they going to be okay if something happens to you? So, you always think of your family. You always make it a challenge to make sure that they're in good hands or they're living okay. I always like to always be in their lives when they need me and spend time with them because you never know. One day you're here, and the next day, you're not. So, you try to spend time with your kids, grandkids, great-grandkids, and try to get as [many] memories as you can and leave memories with them on things that you [did] when you were there with them.

SB: What is your favorite memory in life thus far?

JG: I guess when you had your first child--when I had my first son. It's changed your life. Now you have responsibility to be there for your child, your first child, and then kids after that. That was a challenge. Another challenge was to push them to make their minds up [about] what they wanted to do for the future. Because they looked at me, and they said, "Well, you didn't graduate high school." I said, "Yes, but you are. You have to make sure you graduate, go to college and make something better of your life." I had a different life change when my father passed away, but as long as I was alive, I kept pushing them to get their education. Then, the other one was when they had kids, and I had grandkids, I'd do the same thing. Every time I see them, I ask my grandkids how they're doing in school, or [if] everything's fine. Do they need anything? Because I want them to get a future in their lives. I do have a great-granddaughter. She's only a year old. But hopefully, when she grows up, I will be able to tell her the same thing, "You need a future. You have to set your mind up. You have to go to school, get a future, go to college, become something. Don't be a follower; be a leader." I always told that to my kids, and I tell [that] to my grandkids. Even my wife's kids, I tell them the same thing, "How was school?" I always think of the future and move forward, which they're doing pretty good themselves. So, that is a challenge.

SB: How did it feel to know you are going to be a grandfather for the first time?

JG: Nervous. I was really nervous when I had my first grandchild. I was scared because my granddaughter was young. She was still in high school when she had my grandchild, but we were able to accept it. We helped her raise the kid, my granddaughter, and pushed her to graduate high school and make a future for herself so she could take care of her daughter. She went on [to] study while we watched the grandchild [at] home until she became a home aide nurse. That's what she does to take care of her kids. She has three daughters, beautiful daughters. She pushes them the same way I pushed my kids when they were young. She's always on top of them, making sure they're doing what they're supposed to be doing. She's

active with her kids. I tried to be active with them when they had things going on. Yeah, [I] was nervous. It was the next step of moving up in the family. The family starts to get bigger. You have your kids, and then grandkids come along, then great-grandkids come along. It's not [just] my side of the family, but your grandmother's side too. She has three daughters, and they have kids and grandkids. So, it's funny because your mother and your aunts, even though they're not my daughters, I consider them my daughters the same way your grandmother considers my three kids as her kids. So, we treat each other with respect. We're always worrying about our kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids. It's kind of funny that you say that because your mother raised my granddaughter. My granddaughter calls her mama. She's five years old--raised her until she started to go to school. The funny part now is that your grandmother is raising her great-granddaughter just to help the kids go to work because they don't have babysitters. So, it's kind of funny the way things work out. There's always a grandkid here or a great-granddaughter here that your grandmother is always watching or me and her are watching over the weekend. The house is always full of kids.

SB: What is your biggest accomplishment in life?

JG: Well, my biggest accomplishment in life is buying my first house. You always want something that you say, "Wow, I worked for this. This is mine." That was my accomplishment, buying my first house. Then, after that, you move forward; you set goals to accomplish things. I think once I met your grandmother, we decided to buy the house in Pennsauken, and that was my second [accomplishment] that we [did], and that is not easy. You get done paying one house off, you decide to move into another house, and you start all over again. I think that my biggest [accomplishment] is buying a house. [I was] kind of nervous, never thought that you can make ends meet, but you always figure a way to make things work. I always have done that. You sit back, and you think about how you can make things work and just trust in the family around you, trust in God. Eventually, things will fall in place, and you can always accomplish anything that's on your mind.

SB: What are you thinking about doing after you retire?

JG: What I'm thinking about doing after I retire? Hopefully nothing. Kick back and relax, which would never happen. I will probably go with your grandmother--probably go to Florida. Maybe retire and move to Florida. Maybe just relax. Just spend time with your grandmother. Go out. Do what we want to do. Worry about us. Enjoy our lives after retirement and family. Maybe go to Puerto Rico, visit family. Go to Florida. She has family down there. Travel. Hopefully, we could do that. Maybe save up enough money and take the whole family to Walt Disney [World] sometime. If me and your grandmother are still in good health, we could take a big family trip to Florida, take the grandkids and great-grandkids to Walt Disney [World]. I think that will probably put a nice finishing taste in our mouths that we've spent time with the whole family all in one shot. I think that will be a big [accomplishment] there, too. Yes, I really do. I mean, hopefully, we could do that.

SB: Would you ever think about moving back to Puerto Rico?

JG: Would I ever think about moving to Puerto Rico? I would love to. But I think the United States--I think here is home. I'm happy where I live. That will be a place for me to just go visit, go on vacation, go back, and see family members. But I think no, I would never probably move back to Puerto Rico. It would just be a nice excuse for me to go on vacation if I wanted to go to Puerto Rico. No, I think here is home.

SB: Is there anything that you want to add to the interview?

JG: No, this was a good interview. Hopefully, I've done good for you. Hopefully, I answered everything that you asked me, all the questions that you asked me. Hopefully, they are good enough for your report. So, you've done pretty good. A little nervous, but we've done pretty good.

SB: This concludes the interview with Jamie Gonzalez. Thank you again for doing this oral history interview.

JG: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 3/24/2022

Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 4/15/2022

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