

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH LUIS CARLOS MENDEZ

FOR THE

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

MAXIMILIAN LAU

Maximilian Lau: I'm just going to ask you your name, because I just have to get it on recording.

Luis Carlos Mendez: Yes. My name is Luis.

ML: All right, hi, Luis. How are you? I'm going to start with the questions. When and where were you born in Panama?

LM: I was born on April 7th, 1967, in Panama City, Panama.

ML: In the very city, or the suburbs of it?

LM: Right in the city of Panama.

ML: All right. What was life like in Panama during your childhood?

LM: Well, it was very simple, to be honest with you. For one, we didn't have technology like we do now, like Apple phones. This little thing here, we didn't have. It was very simple. You'd play under a mango tree, for example. You'd go to McDonald's, you know, eat some fries. You'd do very simple things, play with your friends, hang out with your brothers, cousins. Just do whatever your mom asked you to do, your dad asked you to do. That was life.

ML: On the topic of that, tell me about your family. You're talking about your cousins, your family. What did they do?

LM: What did they do? When we were kids?

ML: No, your parents.

LM: My parents.

ML: Yes.

LM: My mom, she actually was a housewife. She didn't work. She stayed home with us. She was always available to us. As far as my dad, my dad, he worked for the Panama Canal.

ML: He worked in the canal.

LM: Do you know the Panama Canal?

ML: I know the canal, yes.

LM: He used to operate one of those tugboats.

ML: He operated a tugboat in the canal.

LM: In the canal, yes. That was his job. Also, he had a taxi, a cab. When he was off from working at the canal, he would drive his cab. That was like a supplemental income for him, for the family, because my mom didn't work.

ML: Two jobs, right?

LM: Two jobs, yes, you know, to try to make it, yes.

ML: Did you have any siblings?

LM: Yes, I have three more brothers. Yes, I'm the third of four.

ML: Three more brothers?

LM: I've got three more brothers.

ML: That's a lot of siblings. [laughter]

LM: Yes, well, families, actually, back then, four was the average.

ML: Four was the average?

LM: Yes, having like one child, two children, that wasn't too many.

ML: What type of foods did you eat in Panama?

LM: Food, I would say rice is a basic food in Panama, because it goes along with everything else. It goes rice and beans, rice and green plantains, and yellow plantains as well. Soup, chicken soup, what we call *sancocho*, that's another very typical food there in Panama. It's made out of, well like chicken soup, but it has some vegetables that you've got to add to that soup that give it a special flavor.

ML: Was that your favorite dish, or did you have something you specifically really liked?

LM: What did I like? I liked something that is called *arroz con pollo*, which is chicken and rice, but not separate, but together. You've got to cook the rice and then you add the chicken and mixed it up with vegetables, so that was very special.

ML: All right. What type of education did you receive while in Panama?

LM: Well, when I was in Panama, let me think, I finished obviously high school, and I was in college. I studied philosophy before I moved to Seattle.

ML: You moved to Seattle first?

LM: Yes. When I was twenty years old, I moved to Seattle, Washington. But I was actually studying philosophy, back then, before I moved. This was in the year 1987.

ML: In Panama?

LM: In Panama. When I moved here to Seattle.

ML: You went to elementary school and middle school, both in Panama, right?

LM: Yes. We don't have the same system like here in the U.S. We have, obviously, kindergarten. Then after kindergarten, you've got elementary school, which is first grade all the way through sixth grade. Then, seventh grade is basically going to secondary school, the equivalent here of middle school. They go from first, six, seven, eight, nine, and tenth into twelfth grade over there is secondary school. Then, you graduate, and then you go to college.

ML: Then you go to college. Where did you go to university?

LM: I went to a Catholic university in Panama. That's where I was studying, at a Catholic university.

ML: Do you consider yourself religious?

LM: I am, yes. I am very religious. Actually, I'm studying to become a deacon, a permanent deacon, of the Diocese of Paterson. So, yes, I am.

ML: Was faith family-based? Were your parents Catholic as well?

LM: Oh, yes. Latinos, basically, the majority are were Roman Catholic. I grew up with my family, my mom, very Catholic, my dad, very Catholic as well. However, I do have aunts, cousins that they have become Protestant, like Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelicals, and so on.

ML: Your grandparents are all Catholic?

LM: My grandmother became evangelical.

ML: She's an evangelical?

LM: Yes, yes.

ML: Okay.

LM: My grandpa, he stayed Catholic, but he didn't go to church all that much. But my other grandparents, they were Catholic as well.

ML: They were Catholic.

LM: Yes.

ML: Yes, all right. What do you remember about the politics and events happening in Panama as a young man?

LM: Oh, that was heavy. We're talking about 1985, around that time. Man, there was a military government in Panama. I don't know if you read history. You can look it up, actually.

ML: Noriega.

LM: Noriega, yes. General Noriega was actually a dictator, and it really depends who you ask about history. I grew up in the '80s in Panama, and the military government, actually, they took over the country back in '69. I was, what, like two years old, so all I knew was the military government, basically. During the '80s, there was a pressure from the people to change the regime, because it was just military, it didn't change. [Editor's Note: Manuel Antonio Noriega (1934-2017) became the de facto ruler of Panama in 1983, after he promoted himself to the position of full general of the armed forces. Initially an ally to the United States, he was indicted in Florida in 1988 on charges of drug trafficking and money laundering. Noriega was ousted from power in early 1990, after the U.S. invasion of Panama.]

Actually, the U.S. supported the military government in Panama. But the people got tired and they said no more. Even General Noriega, he didn't want to get out of power, and he got corrupted, pretty much, like a lot of governments, and he was actually part of the CIA here in the U.S. This is all theories, and this is during George [H.W.] Bush, Papa Bush.

ML: The first one.

LM: Yes, the one that died not too long ago. He was actually dealing with General Noriega, as General Noriega was part of the CIA. But, in the late '80s, I think about '85, he didn't want to deal with Noriega anymore, because Noriega started dealing drugs with the cartels of Colombia. The U.S. decided that they wanted to get him out of power of Panama. But Noriega decided, "No, I'm not going to obey any laws, any of the mandates coming from the U.S. What I'm going to do is I'm going to stay here in power." It started a whole movement in Panama to try to overthrow him from power.

ML: Where did you stand in this movement? Did you participate in the movement at all?

LM: I would say I did. I was opposing the military government and General Noriega regime in Panama to stay in power, and I remember going to different demonstrations, kind of like what they're having in Hong Kong right now, kind of like that. I remember as a young man going to a lot of those, and I was studying philosophy, so I had a clear understanding that this needs to change. This can't continue when just one strong man basically rules the whole country.

ML: These protests were going on in Panama City.

LM: All over the country, actually.

ML: All over the country.

LM: All over the country people were upset, and, so there was a political party. They called it the P-R-D, the PRD, that they kind of sponsored General Noriega. That was his political party. They didn't want Noriega to be out of power, so they supported him, basically. [Editor's Note: *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD), or Democratic Revolutionary Party, was the party of the regimes of Omar Torrijos and Manuel Noriega.]

ML: Did you know anyone who supported him?

LM: Yes, yes, I actually had a cousin that supported him. He was part of the military. I believe he was a soldier or something. I don't know what the heck it is, but he was a soldier that was helping there.

ML: He was a soldier.

LM: Yes, one of the Noriega soldiers. [laughter]

ML: My subsequent question would be, what did you experience during the U.S. invasion of Panama? [Editor's Note: In December of 1989, the United States invaded Panama to overthrow Manuel Noriega, after his indictment in the United States for drug trafficking and money laundering. Noriega surrendered in January of 1990.]

LM: Well, before that, Noriega actually was overthrown by the U.S. in '89. I left Panama in '87. That's when I moved to Seattle, so I wasn't part of the invasion, to witness the invasion, but all my family was down there.

ML: Your entire family.

LM: My entire family.

ML: Your entire family was there.

LM: Yes.

ML: Do you know what they experienced?

LM: That was the most horrible event that anybody can experience when there's an invasion, because imagine hundreds and hundreds and thousands of soldiers, you know, are shooting into basically your neighborhood and you can see these guys just are shooting on the shores, because Panama has a lot of shores, and basically taking over every single thing that has to do with airports, military bases that Noriega actually ruled, *comandancias* [commands] that they call it, that's where the commanding officers were. Everything that had to do with the police stations, everything that they suspected that there were military police, they were taking it over, and

embassies, the airports, I said before. Very scary. Coming around and knocking on people's home, "Who lives here?" That was kind of scary.

ML: The U.S. was doing that?

LM: The U.S. was doing that, because they were, for one, they were looking for General Noriega, and secondly, they were looking for rebels that were supporting Noriega.

ML: People who were with Noriega, they were looking for them.

LM: Yes.

ML: All right. Wow. You decided to immigrate to the U.S. because of this? Why did you decide to immigrate to the U.S.?

LM: That was part of it. That was part of it, because there was so much economic pressure happening in Panama that it was very hard to get ahead, and people were suffering. All the economic sanctions that the U.S. imposed to the Panamanians, it was very harsh. People couldn't do anything. [Editor's Note: In the late 1980s, the United States imposed economic sanctions on Panama to force Manuel Noriega to relinquish power.]

ML: Throughout the '80s, economic sanctions.

LM: Yes. I would say since 1985, '85-'87, the invasion was in '89, all the way through '95, it was rough. It was really rough, so a lot of people actually fled the country. I did in '87. A lot of people did it after '89 or during '89. They fled to the U.S., to Spain, to Canada, to a lot of other countries.

ML: You saw your economic prospects being greater in the U.S.?

LM: Yes. I would say yes, because my aunt, I have an aunt that lived in Seattle, and cousins, so I have like extended family there from my dad's side. I thought, "Well, you know, I'm just going to give it a shot. I'm just going to go and see how I feel," and I stayed. I stayed in Seattle.

ML: How'd your family feel about it?

LM: My mom was a little hesitant, to be honest with you, but she allowed me to do it. My dad really wanted me to. I said, "Well, that's okay. You know, I will just go one year at a time and see how I feel." I felt comfortable.

ML: The economic crisis was hitting your family pretty hard?

LM: Oh, it was hitting everybody.

ML: Everyone.

LM: Yes.

ML: Yes, so was it harder to find work for you, personally?

LM: Yes. It was rough, especially as a young man, twenty years old, and trying to find a decent job and no experience. You know how that is, when you have no experience, who wants to give you a job? [laughter]

ML: That aunt was the only family you had in the U.S.?

LM: Yes, that's the only one.

ML: When you first immigrated to the U.S., you immigrated to Seattle, right?

LM: Seattle, Washington, yes.

ML: Yes, Seattle, Washington. Then, when did you decide to come to New Jersey?

LM: I stayed in Seattle for like around thirteen, fourteen years, and then, in the year 2000, October 2000, I moved to here, New Jersey.

ML: Okay, all right. In October 2000, what was the community you came to? Who was living there?

LM: I came to a community, actually some priests out of a religious community invited me to come over, you know, to New Jersey, because I was exploring the possibilities of becoming a priest, a Roman Catholic priest. They came to Seattle, and they invited me to come over for what we call a vocation retreat. I did that. Then, a second time, they told me, "We're going to pay for your ticket. Why don't you come over?" They had a house in Stirling, Stirling, New Jersey. That's the community.

ML: Stirling, so that's the community.

LM: Yes.

ML: Was it made up of mostly Latinos?

LM: No, not at all. Actually, most of the people that lived there were mostly Caucasian.

ML: Mostly Caucasian.

LM: Yes. But there was a community of Latinos that were like spread all over different places in Stirling, Basking Ridge, all that area around there, Bernardsville, Morristown.

ML: How did you adjust to life in Stirling? Was there anything you found that was difficult?

LM: I found it to be colder here. [laughter]

ML: I would think so.

LM: It seems colder than Seattle, to be honest. It was colder. It took me a little while to get used to it, because coming from the West Coast to the East Coast is totally different. People on the West Coast are very friendly, and here on the East Coast, people are like New York-style. They're a little bit more ...

ML: Yes, it's a little like that. [laughter]

LM: That was a culture shock for me.

ML: But from Panama, how would you describe the climate?

LM: Panama's hot.

ML: Did you face any prejudice or racism in Stirling or anything while looking for work?

LM: Actually, not really, not really. I wouldn't say that I experienced any prejudice there, or at least I didn't pay attention to it.

ML: You didn't pay attention to it.

LM: Let's put it that way. I didn't pay attention to it. I'm pretty sure there was, there is, but I just don't pay attention to those things. I just keep moving forward.

ML: Did you decide to get any further education in the United States?

LM: Yes. I continued. I finished my college in Seattle. My major was in psych.

ML: Psych. All right.

LM: Then, when I moved to New Jersey, I studied to become what is called a certification on addiction and psychology. I'm a certified drug and alcohol counselor. That's what I do now. Right now, I'm finishing up a master's in systematic theology. That's what I'm finishing up now.

ML: Why did you decide to get that education?

LM: Well, to become a deacon, a permanent deacon, you have to study theology, which is basically studies of the Bible and studies of God and the church. You need to know all that stuff, because you're going to be working in parishes and ministries. It's a five-year program with the Diocese of Paterson, and you need a lot of studies and the practice internships. They tell you that this is what you need to do in order to become a permanent deacon, so that's the program that I'm in.

ML: You were aiming to become a deacon from the beginning. As soon as you came to New Jersey, that was your plan?

LM: No, this just happened within the last five years.

ML: Within the last five years?

LM: Yes.

ML: When you came to New Jersey, did you get further education in New Jersey as soon as you came here?

LM: Yes. I had to transfer credits from Seattle to New Jersey, because every time you transfer from one state to the other, they don't take all the classes that you took at the other state, so they give you some benefits, some credits. I had to go back to the school here, you know, to validate some of those credits, and then continue studying. I got recertified here in the State of New Jersey, yes.

ML: Which school did you get recertified in?

LM: I went to, what college? I know that it was, for the certification, it was at a community college. Morristown? Did they have that program back then? I can't remember. I think it was Morristown. It was so long ago that I can't remember, but I think it was Morristown, Morris County College.

ML: When you came to New Jersey, did you bring a family with you, or did you start your family in New Jersey?

LM: I started my family here, actually, in New Jersey.

ML: In New Jersey.

LM: I met my wife here in New Jersey.

ML: In Stirling?

LM: Yes and no. I say that because the priest that I was working with, the community that I was working with, the ministries that they were dealing with were right here in Parsippany.

ML: Parsippany.

LM: Yes, so, Parsippany, some of them in Morristown. My wife, my current wife, back then, she was part of helping out the ministries. We met through the ministries. So, that's how we met.

ML: Your family now, do you have children?

LM: No. Personally, I don't have children. My wife, she's got a thirty-year-old son.

ML: All right. Is it a very Catholic household with you two?

LM: Yes, you could say that. [laughter] You could say that. Her family's very Catholic, and my family, I mean, obviously, I'm very Catholic as well, a practicing Catholic, if you want to say that, practicing.

ML: Yes, practicing Catholic. In Stirling, was it mainly always mostly whites, or was there any African Americans?

LM: In Parsippany?

ML: No, Stirling, where you moved to.

LM: Stirling, it's mostly white. Yes, there are some families that are Latino. I don't remember seeing too many African American families in Stirling, to be honest.

ML: It was white and Latino?

LM: Yes. Costa Ricans, there was a lot of Costa Ricans in Stirling and Summit. Summit is another town close by. Bernardsville, all the area around there, Basking Ridge.

ML: Are there any other Panamanians?

LM: Panamanians were not. [laughter]

ML: Not in Stirling?

LM: Yes. Not too many Panamanians around here. I'm just unique around here. [laughter] You don't find Panamanians around here. You've got to go to Jersey City. You've got to go to Brooklyn, the Bronx. You know, that's where you find a large Panamanian community. I'm pretty sure they are around, but I just don't know.

ML: There's a larger Panamanian community in New Jersey somewhere? Do you know of any places?

LM: Jersey City.

ML: Jersey City, like you mentioned. Then, anything else?

LM: Not that I'm aware of. South Jersey, I heard Burlington, there's some Panamanians there in Burlington. But mostly, Panamanians, they're in New York.

ML: New York.

LM: Yes. Brooklyn, the Bronx.

ML: Are there any important events or connections you share with other Panamanians?

LM: There is something. It's called the Panamanian Parade. You know they have these little parades?

ML: Yes.

LM: Like the Mexican Parade, the Colombian Parade.

ML: Does it take place in New Jersey?

LM: No. Actually, it takes place in Brooklyn.

ML: Brooklyn.

LM: Then, during Columbus Day, there is a day that is called the *Día de la Hispanidad*. They have a parade in Manhattan, where different countries will participate in that. Panama, it's sometime in October, around October 10th or whatever, they have this parade, only the Panamanian Parade in Brooklyn. Then, they will parade also in Manhattan. The different schools from Panama come to parade in Brooklyn and in Manhattan. [Editor's Note: *El Día de la Hispanidad*, or the National Day of Spain, is held annually on October 12.]

ML: Schools all the way from Panama come?

LM: All the way from Panama. They come. Bands play. They play music. Marching bands.

ML: You participate in this?

LM: No. I don't participate in that. That's like too heavy. But it is fun. A good example would be January 1st, in Pasadena, California, you see those marching bands?

ML: Yes.

LM: Those are the bands that come from Panama. They come and participate here in Brooklyn. They go to Pasadena as well for the, I don't know if you have ever seen it, in Pasadena, California. You know what I'm talking about?

ML: I've never seen it.

LM: Yes, yes, check it out on YouTube. The first of the year, the Rose Parade, the Rose Parade. Check it out on YouTube, the Rose Parade, because they have this Super Bowl. You've heard of the Super Bowl. [Editor's Note: On January 1, the Rose Parade is held in Pasadena, California to celebrate the commencement of the Rose Bowl Game.]

ML: The Super Bowl, yes.

LM: Yes, so they have the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, and that's where they have the parade.

ML: How would you describe Panamanian relations with other Latinos? Do you get along well with people from other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean?

LM: Definitely. Panamanians, we're very mixed. We get along with everybody, and a lot of the Panamanians, we marry other cultures. We are very diverse. We are a mix. Like my wife, she's Colombian.

ML: Your wife's Colombian?

LM: My wife's a Colombian. I tell you, I have seen some of my Panamanian friends, they are married to white Americans or African Americans. It doesn't really matter. It doesn't matter. We don't discriminate all that much as far as getting together with other people. We are very diverse, because that's what Panama is. Panama is a very diverse country. You go there, and you find all kinds of people. We have a lot of Chinese people there, lots of Chinese.

ML: When you were younger in Panama, was it still really diverse?

LM: Very diverse, yes.

ML: Really?

LM: Yes.

ML: It wasn't mostly Latinos?

LM: Well, Panama is full of Latinos.

ML: Yes, I would assume so.

LM: But there are whites in Panama, there are Asians in Panama, there are Indians in Panama, there are Muslims in Panama, Arabs. There are all kinds of people. From Jamaica. One of the things that Panama takes some pride on is that during the construction of the canal, a lot of people from all over the world, from the West Indies, from the U.S., from the islands in the Caribbean, a lot of people came from Jamaica, from different places, and they gathered in Panama, looking for a job, looking for business opportunities, and they stayed.

ML: When you were younger, was there still work on the canal?

LM: No.

ML: Yes. That finished, right?

LM: That was all finished. The canal was completed back in--well, let me see--Panamanian independence from Colombia was in 1903, so the Panama Canal was opening up around 1920, something like that. [Editor's Note: On August 15, 1914, the Panama Canal was opened to traffic.]

ML: All those different creeds are from remnants of those workers?

LM: Yes, they stayed in Panama.

ML: Did you have a lot of ethnically different friends in Panama?

LM: Yes. A lot of Africans. Very mixed, very mixed in Panama. It's almost like New York, very mixed. A lot of Asians, because the Chinese, they came for the construction of the canal as well and they stayed, so there's a lot of Chinese, Panamanian Chinese.

ML: Were your parents culturally mixed? Were they both Panamanians?

LM: Yes, they were both Panamanians. It's hard for us to think that way, like black, white, Asian, Arabic. We don't think that way.

ML: Race is not as big as it is here.

LM: No, because we're very mixed. We don't think that way, "Oh, yes. You're white." We don't even mention that. In our applications, like job applications or whatever, we don't have those little boxes, like we have here, race, ethnicity. We don't have that.

ML: In Panama, you don't have like a check box for race, none of that.

LM: No, we don't. When I fill out my applications to do things here in the U.S. to go to school or whatever, that was the weirdest thing. It's like, "What? I have to check if I'm black or white?" I didn't know what to put there. I didn't know. Seriously, that was odd to me.

ML: Did the rest of your family end up coming here, or are they still in Panama?

LM: No. They're still in Panama. None of them wanted to come.

ML: Do you ever visit?

LM: I go to Panama all the time.

ML: All the time?

LM: Yes. At least once or twice a year. I have my home in Panama as well now.

ML: Has it changed for you? Is it different from how it was when you were younger?

LM: Panama is very different. It's very different. It's very cosmopolitan. Have you been to Miami before?

ML: No, but I've been to Florida.

LM: Florida, yes. Panama is pretty much like Miami, like being in Miami.

ML: Was there like gentrification or something?

LM: It's a very well diverse city. It's a city, like any cities around here. A lot of people. It's like Puerto Rico. There's a lot of tourism in Panama, because we have a lot of beaches and places to go and hang out, so there's people from Europe. A lot of Europeans go to Panama for the boating, because they can bring their boats through the canal, and then they stay and they just hang out. There's a lot of things to do in Panama.

ML: Was there as many tourists when you were younger or no?

LM: There were. There were. Not during the Panamanian crisis, not during the time when Noriega was messing up the country. Actually, there were political sanctions--economic sanctions, rather--and a lot of people were not able to come to Panama to visit.

ML: They didn't allow tourists?

LM: They were, but at your own risk. Something would happen, at your own risk.

ML: Would you consider during the crisis, was it violent?

LM: It was violent. Yes, it was violent, because there was a lot of repression from the government. You couldn't say or do anything against the government, because they would arrest you and put you in jail.

ML: The protests, the ones you went to, were they peaceful?

LM: No.

ML: No.

LM: The protests, they'd become violent.

ML: They'd become violent.

LM: Yes. Definitely, they did.

ML: In these violent protests, did you ever get hurt?

LM: No, I never got hurt. I tried not to get involved. At that time, I was a student at the Catholic university, and I tried not to get too involved in those things.

ML: But you attended, right?

LM: Yes. I attended a few times, some of the marches protesting against the government. But most of the time, those protests would turn violent.

ML: Is there anyone in your family who was super active with that?

LM: Not really. My little brother, he was in the Red Cross, and he actually helped out when there were people injured. He would help out with the Panamanian Red Cross. But, no, we tried to keep a low profile.

ML: You were talking about work and how difficult it was to find a degree. Did you ever have a job in Panama?

LM: I did have a job. I was working at a shop. This neighbor of ours, he used to make parts for different machinery. I graduated from a technical school and I kind of knew how to operate certain machines, so I was kind of helping out, yes, trying to learn the job. But I didn't stay there very long. I stayed probably like six months at the job, and then I didn't make a lot of money there. I was basically just learning, and he would pay me a little bit there on the side.

ML: Did you enjoy it, or did you not like it?

LM: Not really. It was kind of stressful actually to do that job. [laughter] I wasn't all that interested in doing it.

ML: Were you more interested in theology? Did you know that was going to be your calling?

LM: Yes. I would say yes. I knew that I loved God and I love studying theology. Eventually, I knew that that was going to happen, and this is what's happening now, finally. [laughter]

ML: How did you begin working at Greystone Psychiatric Hospital?

LM: Oh, okay. I have been working at Greystone for the last seven years.

ML: Seven years.

LM: Yes. The way it happened is that, I told you before that when I moved to New Jersey, my first job was working as a drug and alcohol counselor in Dover, New Jersey. That was my first job for Catholic Charities, which is an agency of the Diocese of Paterson. I found a job there, and I worked there for almost a year.

Then, somebody told me about working at Saint Clare's Hospital in Boonton. They have a detox unit there. They invited me to come over and work for them, and I did. It was a better salary. It

was a better opportunity, and I decided to do that. In 2001, I started working at Saint Clare's Hospital in Boonton, and I worked there for about ten, eleven years, something like that. Then, they decided to change the company and to sell the hospital to this other organization that was called Catholic Health Initiative. They decided to lay off people, so I was one of them that got laid off. I started looking for a job, I was looking for jobs everywhere, internationally. I looked for jobs in Panama. I looked for jobs here. I applied to work at Greystone, and it worked out.

ML: What does your job entail?

LM: We do a lot of things at Greystone. Since I'm a therapist, a counselor there, so we have to assess, evaluate patients that have a drug problem. These are patients that are mentally ill. They have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, borderline disorder, schizoaffective disorder, all kinds of mental illness. Then, on top of that, they have a substance abuse problem as well. They are either alcoholic addicts, or they could be heroin addicts or painkillers addicts. You name it. We evaluate them and try to find out what the problem is. If they have a severe addiction, they need to go to rehab and take it from there.

We do a lot of education, a lot of didactic groups, helping them understand about their illness, and then prepare them basically for discharge, so when they are done with the treatment and they're going to be going to what is called the next level of care, the social workers, like your mom, place them somewhere they can actually move forward on an outpatient basis. We kind of prepare them for that.

ML: Do you ever follow up with your patients, or do you just prepare?

LM: We prepare them. We are not allowed to do follow-ups, like to call them up and see how they're doing. We don't do that.

ML: You don't do that.

LM: Because of confidentiality.

ML: Yes. What do you find rewarding or challenging about the job?

LM: I would say that people getting better, people getting healthier. When you find about these people, "Oh, yes, so-and-so is doing very well. So-and-so, I saw at ShopRite, and the person was looking great." That's a lot of satisfaction. It's like, wow, we made a difference with this person.

ML: Are there any challenges to it? Do you find anything really challenging?

LM: The challenge is out of ten, at least seven don't get as well soon enough and they relapse, drinking alcohol or using drugs or whatever, so they have to pay a lot of attention to what they do, because, if they slip, they're going to go back into using substances again and that's not good. They start using substances, the medication is not working, and if the medication is not working, they get kicked out of the group homes where they are, or they never return. They continue using, and guess what--they end up in the ER [emergency room], Chilton ER, Saint Claire's ER,

Morristown ER, and eventually, it's a trip back to Greystone, because that's where they're coming from.

ML: They pretty much go back to where they started?

LM: Yes. Because they become very disorganized in their heads, and they decompensate and they're not doing well, so they've got to go back.

ML: That's the frustrating aspect for you.

LM: Yes, I would say that. It doesn't matter how much you try to teach them and educate them, the chances that some of these patients will relapse is very high. Chances for success is not as pleasing as some people would like to have it. Like, "Oh, yes, you have been here for six months, a year." We have patients that have been there for fourteen years, a long time.

ML: You continuously talk to them?

LM: Well, yes, they live there. They live there, so I have to.

ML: In all the places you've worked, like Boonton or Morristown, did you face any prejudice or anything?

LM: Well, here in the U.S., there is prejudice, definitely.

ML: Can you think of any instance where it's really affected you?

LM: Not necessarily affected me directly, but kind of like your antennas are aware if something is up, something is happening, I'm not being treated the same way that perhaps other people are being treated. You can overlook those things. You don't pay too much attention. But you know that it's not the same.

ML: You would say especially where you came in New Jersey, you would say it's not blatant discrimination.

LM: No.

ML: It's just something you can kind of observe.

LM: Yes. It's not something that you can prove. That's the thing with discrimination is you cannot prove it, that that person is discriminating against me. It's more like a feeling, a gut feeling, a gut feeling that you feel, like, "Why did they treat me a little different?"

ML: No one's ever been like openly prejudiced towards you?

LM: No. I wouldn't say that. No.

ML: Like the community you're in in Stirling, no one's like that?

LM: Not at all. Not at all, no. But you know yourself, you know that you're different and sometimes you don't fit in as well as other people, like they just get there and because of the color of their skin, they fit in very well.

ML: Let's talk about Washington for a second. When you came to Washington, was there anything? What community did you come to?

LM: When I got to Washington, Seattle, Washington is very diverse as well. That's what I like about Seattle. The people, they're just a different breed in Seattle. There's a lot of Asians in Seattle as well, lots of Asians, lots of Samoans, from the Samoan Islands, Native Americans, lots of Native Americans over there, and obviously, a lot of Europeans as well. But people are not thinking in that respect, like racism.

ML: I mean, when did you first get there? In Seattle.

LM: When I first got there, in '87, 1987. Yes, it was very diverse. That's what I love about Seattle.

ML: I would say that's relatively recent, so I wouldn't really assume that there'd be like open prejudice.

LM: Yes.

ML: Yes. In Panama, was there any prejudice towards individuals, or was it always diverse?

LM: In Panama. Against who, in Panama? Prejudice against who?

ML: Like any sort of racism?

LM: In Panama, actually, there's more racism Panamanian to Panamanian.

ML: Panamanian to Panamanian?

LM: Than to Europeans. Actually, they're welcoming more [to] Europeans. Panamanian to Panamanian, at least when I was growing up, it was very competitive, people trying to get ahead, regardless of what you needed to do to get ahead, if you have to stab basically somebody in the back to get ahead.

ML: You're talking about workwise?

LM: Workwise, yes.

ML: Yes, workwise. Economically, people really just wanted to one-up each other.

LM: Yes. It's a battle. You've got to make it to the top. It doesn't matter how many people you have to step on.

ML: That's how it was like during the crisis?

LM: Yes. Whoever can actually make it better than others. You needed to have a lot of skills, and you needed to have connections, who do I know? Who can connect me so I can get that job?

ML: The jobs were really sparse during the crisis to the point where you had to have a lot of experience?

LM: Experience was important. It was very important to have experience, so you can actually perform. Jobs were limited. There weren't a lot of opportunities to do a lot of things. Basically, in Panama, the canal, that's a very important industry in Panama, the Panama Canal, and it was very limited back then.

ML: The jobs that came from the canal during the crisis, there weren't a lot of them.

LM: Yes. There wasn't enough.

ML: There wasn't enough.

LM: There wasn't enough at the canal.

ML: Did the credentials get tougher, when you were a young man?

LM: I would say yes. Again, you needed to know somebody that would connect you to work in the canal.

ML: Was it like that prestigious, where you needed some connection, you'd need to know people to get to work there?

LM: I would say, yes.

ML: Yes.

LM: "Who can connect me? Oh, Uncle Bob." Or, "I know somebody that perhaps can actually help you through it." Connections, connections.

ML: What type of jobs would there be on the canal?

LM: Engineer.

ML: Engineers.

LM: Yes. There were all kinds of jobs, even for landscaping.

ML: Landscaping.

LM: All kinds. A clerk. But I was too young at the time to get any of those jobs. But my dad worked there.

ML: What did he do with the tugboat? Was it for anything specific?

LM: Anytime that the boats get to the canal, they can't really drive themselves. They needed the help of the two tugboats over here and two tugboats over here. Through a rope, they've got to pull them through the locks. They can't go on their own. The tugboats are basically the engine for them to go through. They pull them.

ML: There are two on either side?

LM: Two on either side. One in the front, one in the back, and they kind of pull them to get through, so that it won't harm the ship.

ML: Was it dangerous?

LM: It's always dangerous, because you're pulling on this ship that is huge, and if something happens, we're talking about millions of dollars lost there. It costs a lot of money to get through that.

ML: Were your father's hours really long?

LM: Some of them were long, yes. Recently, they remodeled the canal, so they can actually fit bigger boats, bigger ships, like battleships if they need to. That's one of the agreements with the U.S., that if there is a war, the U.S. actually can go through the canal. They can intervene. They can actually drag their ships through the canal, for protection. If the Russians wanted to go and invade Panama and take over the canal, they can't do that. The U.S. can actually intervene rapidly. It's all in the treaty before they gave the canal to Panama. The canal belongs to Panama now. In the year 2000, it was given to Panama. [Editor's Note: The Torrijos-Carter Treaties were two treaties negotiated between the United States and Panama in 1977 that authorized the U.S. to defend the Panama Canal from threats and guaranteed the return of control of the canal to Panama in 1999.]

ML: On the topic of the U.S., do you have any view on their entirety of operations in Panama from the '80s until I would say when they sort of eased up a bit in the 2000s? What's your view on them? Do you have a specific view on U.S. intervention?

LM: The problem with the U.S. is that they want to have their noses everywhere. Different countries, they have sovereignty. They have to allow countries to run their own business. The whole thing is that the U.S., they want to tell other countries what to do. Recently, that has become a huge problem with a lot of the countries, and in Panama, it hasn't been different. They

want to run the economy of Panama as they run the economy here in the U.S., to the point that it may work here, but it doesn't work over there.

ML: Are you saying like capitalism?

LM: Capitalism, exactly. They want to run it the same way. If you want to buy a car, it costs 28,000 dollars here. In Panama, it will cost probably thirty thousand, even more expensive, but people in Panama make less money than people here in the U.S.

ML: What is Panama? Is it socialism?

LM: Capitalism. It's like here.

ML: It's capitalism.

LM: It's a democracy.

ML: Democracy.

LM: Panama's a democratic country. We have elections every five years.

ML: When you were still young, did you know the U.S. was behind Noriega?

LM: No, I didn't know anything about that. I really didn't know too much about politics back then.

ML: Even when you were in college?

LM: That was when I was a little older, when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen.

ML: Did you know the U.S. was sort of behind that?

LM: Well, yes, it was before the year 2000. In Panama, we have the U.S. bases there. We've got military bases. We've got Army bases, Navy, Marines. We've got all those bases, several bases there, so we've got a lot of people from the U.S. living there in Panama, on the Panama Canal. It wasn't all that difficult to encounter Americans walking left and right in Panama, so we were very familiar with what the U.S. was doing.

Some people rejected it, the interventions of the U.S. there, because their bases, "They have American bases there! This is Panama. This is not the U.S." But I guess they rented the bases to the U.S. government to have those bases there. They have what was called the Southern Command was based in Panama, the Southern Command. Every time there was a war, there was something in Central America, the Southern Command, the generals there will actually rule and tell people what to do in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, all those places. The U.S. had their noses everywhere, and Panama was one of those countries. That was a little different.

ML: Regarding Noriega, when you were going to those protests and witnessing what was going on, did you know that the U.S. used to be pulling his strings before? Was it common knowledge that they were kind of with him before?

LM: Everybody knew that in Panama that they were kind of working with the U.S., yes. Sometimes they would come to Washington, D.C. first, before they wanted to do something in Panama.

ML: Was there any hatred towards the U.S.?

LM: No. I wouldn't say hatred against the U.S., but people were kind of like synchronized, with whatever the U.S. was doing also will impact Panama. That was so much of the intervention of the U.S. government in Panama, that we almost felt like we were like Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is not a country.

ML: It's part of the U.S.

LM: It's part of the U.S. We had that feeling, like we were a sovereign country, but at the same time, we were kind of hanging on to the U.S. and they have a lot to say about Panama, what to do, who was going to govern Panama, and that kind of thing. Even the presidents before Noriega, they paid attention who was going to be the president of Panama, because that would make a difference.

ML: What was your view on it? Did you have any certain view towards the U.S.?

LM: The way I grew up is that they were looking at the U.S. as protectors, like protecting Panama from other countries, basically. If other countries wanted to harm Panama, the U.S. was going to protect them. That was I guess the philosophy that they were teaching the Panamanians, which was stupid. It wasn't really true. They were just basically stealing things from Panama, until we realized that, "You know what? We can actually run the canal, and we can make all that money that the U.S. government is making on the canal. We can make all that money." After the year 2000, we realized that, yes, there is a lot of money that can be made here in the canal, billions and billions of dollars. We didn't do it before. Now, we are.

ML: As a child, did you sort of see the U.S. as protectors?

LM: We saw it as protectors, because Panama really didn't have like an army.

ML: They didn't have an army?

LM: They had a police force, and for the borders, they had soldiers that would protect the borders, but that was about it. But they didn't have armies, not at all. Just the police force.

ML: With all those bases, did you run into U.S. soldiers a lot?

LM: Oh, yes. That was just typical. Especially because my dad used to work at the canal, we had some benefits at the canal. We used to go there to the hospital just to visit. We ran into soldiers, U.S. soldiers, Marines, Army, all the time.

ML: Would you say between the Panamanian people and U.S. soldiers, was there a good relationship?

LM: Tense. I would say there was a lot of tension.

ML: It was tense. When you saw a soldier on the street, there was a little ...

LM: Yes. Because they would look at the Panamanians kind of like over their shoulders, like we were less than them. There was this sense of superiority.

ML: Yes, from the soldiers themselves, they thought they were superior to you.

LM: Yes, yes. They would hire Panamanians to clean their houses, and, yes, they would pay them better than they would get paid in Panama. There was always this sense of, yes, they are better than us, and they made people believe that, like, "Yes, we're the U.S."

ML: The Panamanians, did they buy into that?

LM: A lot of people did, yes. A lot of people did. A lot of the women, they wanted the men. They wanted to marry somebody from the U.S. living there as a soldier.

ML: There was like a certain prestige that came with it.

LM: Yes, exactly, yes. "Oh, yes, she got married to that soldier." Then, the soldier would come back here to the U.S. and get her papers or whatever and she would stay here and then she would come back to Panama with benefits and all that. It was interesting the interactions, social interactions, how they will present themselves, like you are married to a U.S. citizen and you have certain status.

ML: You've never personally known any soldiers?

LM: Yes, I met several soldiers. I was a soldier.

ML: You were a soldier?

LM: Yes. Well, I was at the Reserve, the Navy Reserve, when I was in Washington, in Seattle, Washington. I wasn't a soldier in Panama, but I was a soldier for the U.S. Navy for a couple of years, not very long.

ML: You enlisted?

LM: I enlisted as a Reservist, yes. That means that I had to drill on the weekends. It was during peacetime. This was back in '96, '95, [after] the Gulf War, the Persian Gulf War, so I didn't go to that. Then, I got out, because I didn't feel like there was a need for me to be there. Doing what? Wasting my time. I wanted to do other things.

ML: It's considered service, though, right?

LM: Yes, I did service, not for very long, but I can say that I was part of the armed forces. I have my uniforms and everything, as a Reservist.

ML: You were in the Reserves.

LM: [Yes].

ML: Do you like living in New Jersey?

LM: I like living in New Jersey, actually. Jersey' s a pretty good state. A lot of the reasons why I enjoy it is because I can travel to Panama easier.

ML: Really?

LM: To fly is, what, five hours from Newark to Panama. That's a direct flight. If I were to be in Seattle, there's no direct flights, Seattle to Panama. You have to stop in Miami. You have to stop in Houston or Chicago, somewhere you always have to stop. This is good.

ML: Is that a primary benefit that it' s just closer to Panama?

LM: Yes. It's like halfway there. Since I have my family down in Panama, it comes very handy.

ML: Have they ever thought about moving to the States?

LM: They don't want to.

ML: They don't want to?

LM: After waiting for their visas for twelve years, you know, finally they were able to get their U.S. residence, my brother didn't want to, so they sent him back. How many people have you seen that they send back a resident? They said, "We don't want to come here. We have our houses. We've got our jobs. We work for the government in Panama. Why bother going to the U.S.? Who wants to do that?"

ML: They work for the government?

LM: Yes. My brothers work for the government in Panama, yes, for the bank, *Banco Nacional de Panamá*, and the other works for some type of, some official government, I don't know what they do. Some kind of *registro público*, register that they have to do certain things.

ML: You visit Panama very often. Do you have your own house?

LM: Yes, we own a condo there.

ML: You own a condo?

LM: Yes. That's why I said, I go there every year, at least once, you know, to go home.

ML: You consider that more home than New Jersey?

LM: I would say yes. I have two homes. I've actually got three homes, because my wife also has a home in Colombia that belongs to her, so we've got a Panama home. We don't own a house here in New Jersey. We rent. But we live here, and we work here. I have been here for, what, nineteen years, since the year 2000, nineteen years.

ML: You consider Panama more home than anywhere else?

LM: I would say yes. That's where my mom is. She lives there.

ML: Your mom lives there still?

LM: My mom lives in the condo.

ML: In your condo?

LM: Yes. Wherever your mom is, that's home. [laughter]

ML: Yes. Thank you. Thank you for this. This was a good interview. I really liked learning about this.

LM: You don't have any more questions?

ML: No. We went through all of my questions.

LM: Yes?

ML: Yes.

LM: Wow. That's good.

ML: Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed.

LM: Okay, I hope this is helpful.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Isabella Kolic 03/11/2021

Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 4/23/2021

Reviewed by Luis Carlos Mendez 8/9/2021