

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH CARMEN SALAVARRIETA

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Ms. Carmen Salavarrieta. Is that how you pronounce your name?

Carmen Salavarrieta: Yes.

SI: Okay. Today's date is September 13, 2021. I am Shaun Illingworth conducting this interview for the Oral History Archives at Rutgers. Thank you for participating. I would like to begin, if we could, with you telling me a little bit about your family background. What were your parents' names, for example?

CS: My father's name was Daniel Quinchia.

SI: And your mother's name?

CS: Natalie Garcia.

SI: Okay. Starting with your mother's side of the family, can you tell me a little bit about what you know about the family history on that side?

CS: What I know, when I was little, because I didn't spend too many years with them, but I went out there, what I remember was my grandma was a farmworker. So, they had farms and they had horses and they had big farms. The whole family was involved in the farms. What I remember then is I went to see them every day, they took me when I was six years old, and everybody was just very hardworking all day and they have nice things that I really looked to them and I liked what they were doing. They cared about the people who lived next to the farms. Every morning they would check on them, some of the neighbors; I'd see my grandmother--I never knew my grandfather from that side--but my grandmother would get up on the horse and check her neighbor who wasn't feeling good. That really impacted me a lot, to care about others. I always had that on my mind, the way she was. They had relatives who used to live with them. My mother and father wasn't living with them. We lived in another part of the town, but that wasn't with the family. It was all workers and farmworkers, and they all have business. That's what I remember about them.

SI: You lived with your mother's mother. Is that correct?

CS: No. At that time, I lived with my real mother and father.

SI: Okay. What about your father's family? What do you know about them?

CS: I know more about them because we grew up close to them. My grandma--I never knew my grandfather also, but I knew that he was a farmworker that had a lot of coffee beans, maybe a thousand acres of coffee beans, a lot of horses, a lot of farms. This is true with a lot of the farms today, sons and daughters, for them to handle it, and she keep one. So, I was very close to her. Since I was two, they say I always run to her house. Her sons, each one got a farm to handle it, and she had her own. I will go with her to the farm and she would check the workers and the coffee beans and the horses and cows. She was a very, very busy lady, who worked all the time.

I was very close to her and I always admired her. She was also very charitable. They all handled their farms in different ways. My father was one of them who, when he got it, he don't even know how to handle it, and he was becoming a different person. He became an alcoholic and abuser, abuse in the family with the kids. I have another two siblings at that time. They were little ones. I didn't like that situation, so I spent a lot more time with my grandma.

My grandma had a house in the downtown. She didn't live on the farm; she'd just come down with cans. She had people who handled the farm. I stayed with her in the town, and most of the time I spent time with her. So, I learned a lot from her. She was the kind of person that Saturdays, they would bring a lot of the food from the farm, like they had beans and they had plantains and they had all kinds of fruits and vegetables. They'd bring the big boxes. I would help her distribute it in baskets to give it to the neighbors and to the immediate family, and that really impacted my life. I thought that was wonderful to care about other people. That was my father's side. I always spent a lot, a lot of time with her. I went to a little bit of school, but I started to have my own mind of things I want to do. I would always have with horse races, and cows, they'd do the fairs where they select cows to buy and share with other people. That's part of my really young years that I remember in my life.

SI: The town that you were talking about, this is Sevilla?

CS: Sevilla, yes. [Editor's Note: Sevilla is a small city in western Colombia in Valle de Cauca. Sevilla is well known for being in the coffee-producing region of Colombia.]

SI: Okay. The farm area, was that called Sevilla Valle?

CS: No, it was called Barragan. It was two to three hours down from there, a little town where they live.

SI: Okay. When were you born?

CS: I was born in 11/1/1950. For many years, I always thought it was '51, because half of my paper was '51 and the other half [was 1950]. At that time, people not really, the system, they always had different [birthdates]. It wasn't that important for them. For the farms people, it wasn't that important. I had that for a long time. So, I started doing all kinds of different papers and certifications, and now it was different.

SI: Okay.

CS: That's one thing that impacted me was that I really didn't grow up with my real mother or my real family. I always had my own mind that I don't want to live in that situation. She started having a lot of domestic violence. That's why these days, I work a lot on domestic violence because I think it impacts children's lives forever. So, we'll never forget those [experiences]. You started feeling a different way when you grow up in that kind of environment. [Editor's Note: Ms. Salavarieta begins to cry.]

SI: Yes.

CS: I'm sorry.

SI: No, it is a very sensitive subject. Do you want to take a break or keep going?

CS: No, it's all right. We can keep it going.

SI: Okay. You started school then. What were your schools like in Colombia?

CS: I don't remember too much. I didn't go to school too much in the town because my grandma would assist me and then my father would get mad about it. He would drop me off at the school. I was very rebellious at that time, so I wanted to do my own things. I wanted to be with my grandma. I wanted to work. I wanted to work with her. I was with her all the time, and he didn't like that. He started to get very mad about it. So, he would take me to school, and it was back and forth. It was kind of difficult. I started thinking about that I had to leave someday. That was my way, to leave. I don't know why, but that's the way I thought about it. You know why? At that time, John F. Kennedy was the president, and I'd see the pictures. I'd keep a picture with me all the time. The United States, I really wanted to go. I don't know why. I read about it. I wasn't reading, but people would read to me when I was little. I'd see the picture of him, and I liked that. [Editor's Note: John F. Kennedy served as the U.S. president from 1961 to 1963. He was assassinated on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas.]

Also, one thing that impacted me was when I was in the time that I was able to put them into the school, she had the struggles for the milk and the bread for the children. So, they would bring them, at school every morning, you'd go into the school, they would prepare like a meal for you and they would give you bread and cheese. I thought that was so nice because some--not me--but some of the kids would come into school with no breakfast. Some of the families were very poor. My grandma made sure that I had it. When I was with my mother, I would not have breakfast sometimes because my father, the way of his life was so bad that he would not provide for the family anymore. So, that impacted me. Every time I ate that bread, I'd think, "Oh my God, this is so amazing. The President of the United States think about children in other countries, that they don't have that."

To this day, I collect everything about him. I've been to Washington. For me, Kennedy is like a king. I always had it in my mind that he brought me to this country, worked my way coming to this country, because since I was little, I always thought to him to bring me one day here. Every time I'd see an airplane fly on top of Sevilla, I would say, "One day, I am going to be on that airplane to leave here." You know what, today, to just think about those things, thank God they are behind, but that's why I give all my life to people today and children and teenagers and try to make a difference in their lives.

SI: Wow. Go ahead.

CS: Another thing that impacted me was, community people, I don't know where they come from, one Christmas, they come to Sevilla and they went to the store and they brought a lot of toys for children, sacks. They were giving sacks. They were giving little things for all the

children, and I was able to get my first doll. I maybe was five, six years old, a little doll that I always I wanted. I never had it because if my grandma wanted to buy it, my father would not allow me to have it. He was a different person. So, I was able to get it, a little one, maybe three inches doll, plastic, but I was so happy that people were thinking about bringing the toys for Christmas to the children, that we don't have any. We'd watch some of those kids, Christmas comes, and everybody's neighbors would get up in the morning. They had toys. They'd come outside and play with the toys, and we don't have none. A lot of kids would come out to just watch the neighbors play with toys and we don't have anything, not even a small ball. So, you grow up like that and you say why, but you're happy. You play with the stones or you play with whatever you find on the street and you're happy at that time. But then, when you started growing up, you'd think about it, and that impacted my mind. It was always on my mind. That's why I do something today that I will tell you later on. I'm very grateful, very, very grateful of that, that I became the person that I am today.

SI: Were any of your brothers or sisters with you when you would be with your grandmother?

CS: They were too little. They were little babies, so they were not present then.

SI: Okay.

CS: I was rebellious. I was crying and screaming and everything to be with the other side that I know than to be in my own house. Also, every time he would come in drunk and beat up my mother, I was too little, so I'd get hit all the time. I always would step in front of him and I was too little, so I'd fly into the walls. I started having bad thoughts. I said, "One day, I'm going to really kill him." So, it's just something that goes through your mind. I always pray a lot. I'm very religious, go to church and pray, and ask my grandma to take me and pray a lot to ask God to give me a solution to help me someday to be fine, centered in my life.

SI: How old were you when you started the process of coming to the United States?

CS: Okay, let me tell you this, a little bit more about that.

SI: Sure.

CS: Because of the situation, I'd been growing up too soon, you know, by seven years old, you always think like twelve or fifteen. I started doing a little job on the side. I started helping people, or the children would go there. That way, they can give me some food and also give me some money. One of the days that he beat up my mother so bad, I went to her house and I found her bleeding [badly] and everything. I called the cops. I told her, "You have to go and live in with your mother." Her mother, her family, lived maybe six hours away from where we were, six, seven hours. With the morning that I collect, the little work, and they give me the money, I took a taxi to her. I packed her in the car and packed the children. There were about four little-- she had a lot of children. It was all four or five, all little ones, one after another. I packed her in the car. I packed up everything. I put her in there and I say, "You go to your mother and be there with all these kids." She was thinking, "What about you?" "I stay with my grandma, don't

worry about me." At that time, I thought I can survive myself. I was very grown up. So, I sent her and said goodbye. In my mind, I know it was forever. I know I wouldn't see them again.

That weekend, at that time, we went to a big fair, that I know a lady for the fairs that my grandma would go to sell horses and cows. I met a lady that had come from Bogotá, all the time, with the father. Their father was a beef farmer there. I met her and she was telling me one time, "You know, any time you want to come with me to Bogotá, I can take you," and I always had that in my mind. I told my grandma, and she don't ever say nothing. She don't say yes or no, nothing. She would just look at me. She always worried about me, but she don't say too much.

When I sent my mother, the following day, I went to the fair, I saw her and I told her, "Listen, this time I'm going to go with you." I told my grandma I would leave, and she said, "It's good for you. That's your life, Carmen." They called me Emilia because my real name is Carmen Emilia. [She said], "It's what you wanted all the time." She knows what I really want. She knows I was strong, and that was not my type of life that I want to live. She said, "Okay, I come back in one month. You get ready."

By that time, my father come back, he was away at that time. You know, he always had women and he would leave three or four days. He find out that my mother wasn't there, so he come after me. I had to hide myself in some neighbor's houses because he knows I sent her, because I always told him, "One day, I'm going to help my mother and take her away from you."

That month passed. My grandma was very supportive. She knows that that's what I really want to do. When she come back, I don't have too much to pack, just one pair of clothes I had. I went to with her to Bogotá. I wanted to start my life in Bogotá with the family. Of course, it's very different to grow up in a different family. She was a wonderful, to this day, she was wonderful. I call her my mother. I always called her mother. She was very, very nice to me. She passed away a couple years ago. She presented me to her two daughters and three sons, and they weren't too happy about it, because they thought I was coming and she wanted to put me to work in her house and be maybe a housekeeper or something. She say, "No, Carmen is going to go to school. I'm going to send her to school and she is going to school where you girls go," a private school in Bogotá. So, they weren't too happy about it. She had a daughter-in-law who always hate me because she didn't want me to be part of the house.

That made it very, very difficult for me. I cried a lot. It was so difficult, I had no rules. I never knew rules at that time. It was my own rules. She started give me rules, "This is what you do. This is the way you talk. This is the way you did things." I, of course, was little, so I didn't want to agree with her. So, she will yell at me if I don't listen, but I was grateful. I never was mad about it, because I will realize that she was there for my own good. That's when I started going to school with her daughters, and they also got mad at me sometimes, because, "Why should you be treated like a daughter? You're not a daughter." You know, you'd get all that, but I was patient and I prayed a lot every time. I helped her out and I did whatever and I loved her. She had a big store making wedding dresses, so I always helped her out. I was always there with her. I think I did my part with her. She was very, very nice to me. I have no regret or nothing, the family and all what they did to me, but then later on, they realized, every time, we were not

together, and I was different and I was loved then and I was just a person who needs caring, with love.

To this day, we're very different. They live in Georgia. She died. Actually, they live in New Jersey. I was very close to her, and my children loved her. I teach them to love her and admire and respect her because she was wonderful. I always cared about her. When they moved to Georgia, I'd fly down there to see her, and I was there with her a month before she died.

When I was growing up, I went to school a little bit then. She had a big contract in New York for one of the biggest stores for dresses for weddings. I was maybe fifteen. She went and she had told us [she would] send back for us, because at time they bring somebody [to do our] papers and everything. So, they leave us with her daughter-in-law. Oh, my God, that was the worst [time] of my life. I don't know what's worse, be with my father or with that lady. She was very bad. She did a lot of terrible, awful things to me. She was calling me, I wasn't part of the family, I was just somebody who was picked up on the street, things like that. I feel bad. I talked to the priest. I said, "I can never forgive her, never." So, it was on my mind.

SI: Were you able to stay in touch with your grandmother while you were in Bogotá?

CS: Oh, yes, just a little. She didn't want me to get in touch with her because she knew that my father was very bad. My mother who I grew up with, she would go every month or she would bring a little note for me and she would write something for her. When I started writing, I was able to bring it and she will bring something for me. She would send me little things in the coffee beans or something from Sevilla. So, we continued to be in touch between her, not personally. I saw her maybe ten years later, when they told me she was dying. So, I went back to see her, and that was the last time that I saw her. In between that, I don't, but I know I always had the support of her. It was really a tough life. It was not easy.

SI: Yes.

CS: That gave me a lot of strength to be what I am today. I am very grateful to the mother that I grew up with. Oh, I love her so much. I loved what she was able to give me and I love her every time she correct me because I knew it was for my own good. I think the person that I am today, it's because of her effort to change me and she really did change me. She impacted and all that. Even my stepbrothers and sisters, they were good sometimes, time to time, and then we grew up and we be friends, but you know, in part, you were little and you've been treated bad, something is always in your heart.

When you feel what these people today, when they go through all this situation, that's why I get involved, a hundred percent, in their lives and try to help them out. I don't tell anybody. I never tell anybody my real life that I have domestic violence because they have enough with their own problems. Even my children, they have no idea about my past. I never told them that. This is the first time really that I open up to say anything because it's important for the people to see, and whether you can come out, your life, it doesn't always have to be that way. You work hard and you have hopes. So, that was the situation. So, it's hard, but thank God, it's changing. I am very, very grateful for my life today and now.

SI: You said you were fifteen when you and your adopted family moved to the United States.

CS: It wasn't the whole family, only her. She left the country and then she leave us in care of the daughter-in-law, who was a very mean person. She moved, and she started doing papers for us. Then, when I was almost seventeen, I couldn't take it anymore, I couldn't do it anymore. I got to the point that she would beat me up and I would turn around and then do it to her. So, the situation started to be so bad that I had to [get] out of the house and just move out. I dropped [out of] school at the time; I couldn't do it anymore. She was very upset because they gave her the wrong information. I sent letters to her and let her know that I couldn't take it anymore; they would say something different, so she would believe what they say, that I was doing other things, that I was an alcoholic, some very bad things. I got to the point that I find the neighbor to help me out and I move out. That's when I started my life on my own; I was fifteen. It's difficult, but I think that was my way to be. I couldn't control it anymore.

Then, I started to work a little bit. That family had friends [who were] politicians and had friends [who were] lawyers. I started working in their office a little bit on the phone, but I always wanted to continue a school. So, I continue a little bit, I couldn't do it too much, because I would have to work all day. I had to pay for food and wherever I stay. Then, years later, I met somebody and then I got involved and that's something that I really don't want mention about, but it was involvement and I had some problems in there.

Then, she come back to Colombia and she wanted to talk to me. She said to me, why I did those things when I left the house. I told her, I couldn't take it. I couldn't deal with it. So, I told her, I would like to go there. She said, "You're never going to be able to come. One day maybe, when you change and you come back to the house, I will take you." I said, "No, I don't want to come back to the house." I can't; it was too much for me already.

I started to work a little bit here and there and met some people, and then through help with those people, that's when I starting thinking, "This is it. I'm going to work my way to go to the United States," and that's what I did. I met some people who were able to [help], and then I met my husband. He left because he was coming to here to finish his college. My husband is a chemist. But he left. I told him that was it and nothing else. Then, I wrote back to my mother and said, "Listen, I want to visit you." By that time, I was having friends and people that were able to help me. So, that's how I was able to get the visa and get everything and get here.

SI: Okay.

CS: That was my beginning here.

SI: What kind of work were you doing in Bogotá when you were on your own?

CS: Well, on my own, I was [answering] phones and notes and things like that, just little jobs I know how to do. Occasionally, [I would] do big work. But I was able to get involved with people who had power and money and all that through their families. Then, between that also, a lot of things come out. Some things, I definitely don't want to go over in this. It's painful, and

the decisions that you take wrong sometimes in life and I don't know why. From that time, my mother, my stepmother, she always keep in touch with her and said, "I'm going to come and see you." So, that is one of my decisions, when I was able to get the visa and everything, that's it. I worked, you know, you work and you meet people and you ask people, and things like that too. They teach you and you get a lot of wrong friends maybe, wrong people, but you get in there. One thing I always told myself, "Never do things." At that time, they ask you all the time to get involved with drugs. I never did. I never was going to do something like that, because that is not the person I grew up to be. But I was different. You get involved with these people and they help you out.

That's when I come here, and I come to her. I was very happy to be by her, and I always told her how much I love her and how much I respect. We sit down and one of the times we sit down and I had a couple wines and I told her everything and I cried a lot. I told her how bad the daughter-in-law was cheating me, how bad they did it for me and the terrible things they did to me, between her and her husband and her family, things like that. She understand and she said she was very sorry she believed them and don't believe me, but it was already past. I come here not only to visit her and to be here with her. Then, I saw everybody working. I said, "Why not? It was so easy to work." By that time, already my two stepsisters were here. My stepfamily was here. They were already going to school. So, I said, "Why not? I'm going to go to school too." So, I started going to school.

I had a little background, some English over there, when I was going to school in Bogotá, but I don't have a lot. I started to go to school at night, and then I decided to take a job. I was going to be here for two months, and I started working and I like it. At that time, when you come to this country, you just go and apply. They give you the Social Security. You want to stay. You want to go to school. They give you the papers. I had a visa, but at that time, they also give it to you for a year, to have a visa for a year to stay in the country. I really was just starting to like it and like it. I said, "Why go back?" Then, I started in Morris School, and Morris School, I met people and memorable things. That's when I started to do more and more. I passed a year, and I decided I'm going to stay. I started to reach out to people that I know who were here from Colombia, and eventually I reached out to my husband now. We've been coming together again, and it's a long story. So, we are here.

SI: Wow.

CS: We are going to be fifty years we are together.

SI: Wow, congratulations.

CS: Thank you, thank you. I really started going to school. At that time, that's one thing I'm telling everybody now, at that time--I immigrated in '69--at night, you'd see everybody walking to schools, churches, high school had classes at night, all kinds of programs. People take those classes, college classes at night. So, they all work at day time and they all walk in the streets to go into school. So, I really admire that. The community, at that time, wanted to be educated, which I struggle today to try to teach people that they had to [get] educated. They said they had

to get the English background. That's what I do, have that now, with the people. So, that's how I started life like that.

Then, I started my own family, when I was going to have my child. I had my little one. I had my second child. I started going to this clinic. When I started going to this clinic, I'd see people--by that time, I had a little car--I'd see people had no transportation, especially seniors, and they had to walk. They don't have too many buses at that time for people. They had to walk. So, we started to give them rides to the houses, and at the same time, we hear about their stories. They don't have food. They have a terrible time because their granddaughters or sons would take the money from them. So, you started to hear. [Editor's Note: The clinic refers to the Plainfield Health Center, which opened in 1969 to provide health care to underserved residents in Plainfield's West End. Founded as a part of the Model Cities Neighborhood Program, the Plainfield Health Center started as a "well baby" program and originally operated out of a storefront on West 4th Street.]

At that time, I already have in my mind, all the past, and I always think that one day I'm going to be able to help people. I don't want people to be alone. [I wanted to] help out the same way my mother, the family I grew up [with], helped me. I wanted to do that. I wanted to give it back to the people. So, it was every day. So, I talked to the clinic, I would be there every morning, two hours. I was expecting a baby and I was coming for my treatment, but still, I had a little time in the morning. I would come in. I would work in the afternoon. I would take some class, English in the morning. For whatever shift I was working, I would shift to be going to school, but I started helping at the clinic and give it right to the people. That clinic was so small; they don't have anybody [who spoke Spanish]. I don't speak too much English, but by being in the school already, it was a couple of years, I know a little bit already. I started helping people, and I got in my mind, I said, "This is one goal. I'm going to try to hire people who are bilingual." You think, those things are long ago, that it had to be done, but you don't know and you're going to try to find a way. I always do that. I don't know how to do the things, but I think I'm going to find a way to do it. That's how I reach out, a lot of people, to know how to do things that I don't know how to get. So, I was part of volunteering there. All the time, that is how we started that clinic. They will have meetings with the people that were helping, and I would come into the meetings. I sat and talked to everybody. I become social with them and I started getting into the meetings and asked the director of the clinic, I'm talking to, I ask that it was important to have a bilingual person out in the front desk especially.

Two years later, thank God, I was very, very happy. They told me they were looking for somebody bilingual to work at the front desk. I was so glad because I know I work. I talked to them a lot, trying to do that, and that's when we started to have bilingual personnel in that clinic. I got more involved then. It was only right. Somebody said, "Will you please get me to Social Security. Will you please take me to the supermarket? I need a ride to this or that, find some medicine or go to the doctors." So, I would start scheduling myself to do extra work with them, because that was something that I really wanted, and that fueled my life. Even though I had children, I had my husband, I had my work, everything, but I always had time to help people, always find the time, because it fueled me. So, I did it for a couple years, and they ask me to, "Please, can you be a part of us and work?" and they started me. People saw me do volunteer, and other people started doing it, little by little. They ask me how you can do it, and I used to

tell them to get involved. So, I was good to get a group of people to volunteer for them, helping out different things.

Then, they ask me a couple years later, I was becoming part of the board. I had to go for classes to how to become board member, how to be involved. Me working with them and being there almost every day, I learned a lot, and little by little, I learned more. So, I was becoming part of the board. So, being on the board, I had more power to have my voice here, what people need, what employers need. That was my role in there. I was a board member there for thirty-five years. By that time, when I was there, it was a small clinic and we started to fundraise, everybody involved, all the board members. We had wonderful board members and the president was very nice, a fundraising person, and we were able to raise money to situate a big clinic, to build it. National Starch donated to us ten acres of land in Plainfield. With that land, we would raise the money for building and we build a big clinic, which is running now. [Editor's Note: The Plainfield Health Center is now called the Neighborhood Health Services Corporation (NHSC), located on Myrtle Avenue in Plainfield. NHSC operates two satellite locations in schools in Plainfield and a clinic in Elizabeth.]

SI: Wow.

CS: It's twelve years old now, a beautiful clinic. We have all the services there. So, I've been involved. I stopped being a board member only three years ago for some issues that happened in there. I have a voice and I raise my voice whenever I think something is wrong. We had more board members and the president that didn't like it at that time. They want to keep things quiet. I'm not a quiet person. If something goes wrong, it doesn't matter. It can be the police department. It can be the chief. It can be the government, whatever it is, I raise my voice. So, that's why I stopped, but I still go there and I have very good friendship with everybody, all the employees. I was the voice of the employees there, all the time, and they know. Wherever they are, they reach out to me and they send the people to my place. I have a good relationship with them.

SI: I want to go back to when you first came to the United States. Did you live anywhere else, or was it always Plainfield?

CS: Always Plainfield.

SI: Okay.

CS: When I move out, I move out from my mother's house. I had an apartment in Plainfield a couple years, yes.

SI: Okay. What was the town like when you first got there?

CS: It was beautiful. It was so nice. They still had horses, you know, the big mansions on Central Avenue; they still had the horses at that time. You'd see people go out in the street with horses. Everybody had their pool open. We all walked downtown. Every Thursday, they had like a night out. Everybody would go out for ice cream and they had the roller for the kids and

they had play. It was a really, really nice town. It was not dangerous at all. Everybody got along wonderful. At ten o'clock, eleven o'clock at night, you were walking [outside], you stay in the school late, working late, and then you walking [outside] and you not be afraid. It was really nice. There was not too much welfare. I never hear about that. They would have [for] the seniors, but they did not have all those kind of free, which, it's the way it is today, but I don't agree with that. Everybody works. Everybody was busy doing their own things, so it was not too many, but it was nice. It was really nice.

Everybody walked on Sunday to the church. I belong to the St. Mary's Church. It was my church. We walked down, and we have a coffee after the church down in the basement with the people. It was a totally different environment, but it was beautiful. Plainfield was really, really [beautiful]. At that time, it was really the name of the "Queen City," you know what it is. The "Queen City" was beautiful. You'd walk in Sleepy Hollow, and even the people from the houses in Sleepy Hollow, [at] Christmas, they would put toys out, anybody would like to come in, and sometimes, they had big town parties, where they have things for the people. It was just incredible. I wish at that time that I took a lot of pictures like today that I do and I wish I had all that. I wish somebody one day will write a book about how Plainfield was and the difference in people. People were so nice, really.

The grade school was a big school for us. A lot of children would walk there. We always went down there to see the art that they have [for] anybody who was interested in that. It was totally different than what it is right now. But you're looking back and you really get a sense of you know what Plainfield was.

SI: When you came here, were you able to speak English, or did you have to learn that when you came to the United States?

CS: I had to learn that. I had a little background, when I went to school in Bogotá. I have a little bit. In Bogotá, everybody takes English, especially when you started high school. You go to high school, you learn the basics, the grammar. So, I have a little bit, but I never liked it. I never liked it, so I had time to learn English. But, no, I don't speak the language, but because I have a little bit, I started going to school and there was that. I really had it in my mind that I had to learn the language. So, I went to school and everything. I even finished high school in Plainfield High School, because I never finished in Colombia. I was too young. So, I graduated from Plainfield High School for the night school.

SI: You said that when you got here, you reached out to other Colombian Americans, including your husband. Were they in the Plainfield area, or were they further away?

CS: A couple, a few, yes, a couple was in Plainfield, and some was far away. So, the ones far away, you disconnected [from] all of them because most of them was a students who want to come here just for a year, for graduation, and some of them will continue maybe far away. At that time, for me, I was concentrating on work and going to school, and I have my own things that I had to think about, so that's what I [did]. So, those people, I would say, later on in years, it was good to reach out and connect. Some people was in Plainfield. Plainfield was popular at that time to people coming to school here because they have a very good programs for a school.

They had an alternate program. You can go to the schools and everything, so a lot of people decided to come here.

SI: Did the Latino community in Plainfield grow a lot over the years?

CS: Oh, wow. Yes, many, many, many. What the difference, at that time, a lot of people from South America was more of the immigrants, but from Spain or from Chile. There were a lot of people from Chile at the time and from Brazil and from Spain. We don't have too much Central American people at that time, and Mexicans, they were here. They always were here, from Mexico, many, many Mexicans. It was a different community. But it wasn't a lot a lot, like you would go and you not find the amount of people that you find today in the towns, all over.

At that time, let's see, it was maybe seven percent Latino, maybe less, and people from Argentina, from Chile, we have a lot of Italian people also at that time coming here. They will go to school and work a little bit and they go back. Maybe, I'd say seven, eight percent, no more. You don't see too many at that time, so that people had a very difficult time to go to the stores and speak Spanish to anybody. Nobody speak Spanish. At that time, nobody, they don't have anybody. That's why I started to help the people here because it was very, very difficult to find anybody who was bilingual, because it wasn't like that anywhere. There was not a Spanish program. You don't see the Spanish program at that time. They just started it. Even the radio, today, we have a lot of radios different, radios [stations] in Spanish. At that time, there was not.

SI: Were there a lot of folks who spoke Spanish at your church, or was it not too many Latinos at the church you went to?

CS: It was. It was because all the Catholic people would come into the congregation every Sunday and they would get involved in the church a lot. So, it was a few, but it wasn't a lot. I remember one time coming to church, maybe it was forty people, forty, forty-five people, but everybody was very close. Everybody know each other because you had coffee after church, and we had affairs outside and things like that. That church was not only Spanish, that church had a lot of English masses. So, they have English and Spanish. At that time, it was only one mass in Spanish, so everybody goes for that, so we see everybody there.

SI: Do you want to keep going or do you want a break?

CS: No, it's okay, we can keep going. They always had one priest [who was] Spanish. That's one thing, one priest [who was] Spanish. I guess when they started growing the Hispanic community, they had one priest who was Spanish, only one.

SI: I was curious, what other challenges did you face when you came here in adjusting to life here?

CS: Well, all the challenges is that you will have people who really look at you different. They will always call you, like, "Oh, you're Puerto Rican." At that time, it was a Puerto Rican community. They've always been in it, but it was a different community, they always keep it for themselves. So, you have to let the people know, "I'm not. I am from South America and it's

okay, they're different and we're different." You let people find out that you're different. You're yourself and you try to do your best, and that is something I really always thought about. Follow the rules, because the mother that I grew up with, she taught me a lot of rules and follow the rules. She was very strict, and I appreciate it so much because that's how I am today. You've got a lot of people that say that, but you also have a lot of other nice people.

When I went to work for a factory years later, I used to not speak a lot of English. I met somebody there who make a lot of difference in my life. She was American. We work together on the same line, and we like each other. We like each other. We would sit down for lunch and she would give me signs and things. I don't understand her too much, just a little bit, but I don't understand. So, she brought a dictionary with her. We [learned] through the dictionary and that's how we started a little bit. She started talking to me from the dictionary; I talked to her. Well, a year later, she spoke Spanish a lot, and I would speak more English. We were very, very good friends. She was very good to me. She was American. I never had too much problem with the people. The people were really nice to me. You know, there was a few there. You always find somebody who's not nice to you and say things. I always taught my children that.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit more about the jobs you had when you came here?

CS: Yes. When I started my life with my husband, we worked hard. He already was working for a big company, and I started little jobs here and there. I was working for American Cyanamid. [Editor's Note: American Cyanamid was a manufacturing company of many different products that was in operation from 1907 to 1994.]

SI: Okay.

CS: I worked nights. I worked for them for a couple years. I was very happy. I always appreciated what I do. I really do. I try to do my best and I really have a good time doing what I do. In the job, I found people that were so unhappy. You'd see them for lunch and they [would] say, "Oh, I hate this work." I always thought be grateful that you have a job, put on a good face, thinking that you're going to make the money that you need for your food, for your rent. I remember one day, one lady was there with me. She said, "Why are you always happy? Why don't you care about how much you're put to work? Look, they [gave] you extra work and you're doing it." So, I say to her because I really don't see it as extra work. I see it as it has to be done. It has to be done. But she was so mad with me, she never talked to me again.

SI: Wow.

CS: I keep on telling people be grateful. If you're working, even if you don't like it, you make your best doing it. That was one challenge. I was there for a couple years. From then, I went to work at a place that offered more money, and at that time, I had more children. We had already three children. That's one thing, I have a big family on my mother's side. My husband comes from his family. We thought about to have a big family. It was so hard, very difficult, but you make your best. That was what we did. We helped each other a lot. He helped me. I helped him.

I had another job; I went to work for a window factory. I was there for another couple years. In the meantime, when I finish the school, I tried to continue, but it was hard with the kids. What I did was I tried to do some work with the neighbors. We had a lot of neighbors that were English speaking, so they would work with me with books and things like that. So, I continued.

Then, I started work as an assistant of a care center, working with children. They took my kids when they were little. They were the babysitters for a long time, until they started school, so I even started working there. So, I worked there for a couple of years, but I found out, when they started going more and more, they'd get sick in school. They don't like it when you have to take time off, because they need you. Being an assistant to a teacher, they need you all the time. So, I have a friend of mine who was a teacher also. She said, "You know, Carmen, I had to leave my work because of that situation because of the children. I do a cleaning service. I work in a big company here, which I work with very nice people. Do you want I can teach you the job and [you] work with me? If you need time, you can take it. You've got the kids in the school, and you come with me. Then, we'll be off by the time the kids get out from the school." So, I started that, and I am so grateful for that work, very grateful. I love it. I've been doing it all these years. I teach a lot of people. A lot of people who come in that are immigrants, I teach how to do cleaning service and they start their own work. So, a lot of people do the job, and they like it. I'm still doing some of that. I have special customers that I work for forty years, forty-five years.

SI: Wow.

CS: I do it even just [to] be with them, we're friends. We travel with each other. I was very fortunate to work with good people that have down shore houses and they invite me for Saturdays or Sundays to be with my children and I would come with them. I help her out, we clean a little bit, and my kids would have fun on the boats. They was a very good people to me. I have a wonderful family. We're still very good friends, and their kids grow up with my kids. They're still good friends. We went to the weddings. We were part of their lives. We had a special family that I worked with for many, many years. It was the two brothers. I work with the two houses, with a daughter-in-law, with a sister-in-law. So, it was the whole family, and they had a big house down there and we would go there. My kids would have a good time. I would work a little bit, and then I would have a good time. So, it was like a family. I love them. I really appreciated my kids becoming very, very close. So, they were exposed to all that kind of life. We are very grateful that's what they give you.

They give you a goal to work hard and reach all your goals, and you can do it. I teach my person that I work with, I say, "Listen, you work hard and you're going to get what you want in life and you will teach each other to work hard and to go to school and very hard in the school. They can be a president. We see the president that we have. You can do anything you want in life, but you have to work hard for it." That's how I [taught] my kids and everything and they was able to be serious to do everything. With my children, we were very, very lucky. They worked hard. They see how hard we work; my husband and I work very, very hard, two jobs and the job part time and everything, just to get an education, so they see what we did. They was able to be the same; that's the way they are now.

SI: Wow.

CS: The job was not hard for me, never. I love it, love it, and I'm still doing it. Sometimes, I just go and do it because they need somebody. I say to them, "Don't get anybody. I'll do it for you." Then, I change my clothes and I go to have lunch with the politicians, the mayor for the town, because you had the meeting. That's the way it is. I'm not ashamed of the work that I do. Some people might be, I'm not. I really love it because you have to appreciate things.

In my country, if you had to push somebody to do that, because people who were middle class, they all have somebody who cook and clean and there's different persons to them. I'm always against that because coming from the background that you don't have nothing, I don't feel that way. Going back to go to Colombia and we go to my in-laws, they have two or three people in the house working for them. I had a good relationship with them, not always. At the beginning, it was very hard. A couple years, it was not good, because in the different cultures, they wanted the people together, same people you have, where you are. You understand what it is, you know, but then after that, they got to know me and we had a good relationship. My father-in-law and I had a very, very good relationship, and I was comfortable with them. We come to visit them and they would always tell the girls, "Make sure you have breakfast ready for Mrs. Carmen." So, I feel better. I don't want that because I want them to be treated the same, but that was the way it is. I'm telling you, what I do, I'm very proud of my job and I'm very proud of my people. I love my customers; they know that. I travel with them a lot. Some of them, they will go to Florida to visit all their friends, the other customers. We would go to Europe together. It was very good.

SI: You were also on the board of the clinic, as you mentioned. Were there other community activities you were involved in?

CS: Oh, yes. At that time, I think that that was my beginning. Then, I was part of the Catholic Council of Women in Metuchen. [Editor's Note: This is the National Council of Catholic Women.]

SI: Okay.

CS: I was doing the community outreach and all that to them. So, I got involved with the bishop, with the priests, and I went to Washington many different times for different conferences. Even with a clinic, we had a conference in Washington, and then we started traveling all over. Sometimes, they had it in Puerto Rico, they had it in California. So, I started doing that, but that was later in years, when the kids were a little bit grown and going to high school. Then, I was part of Muhlenberg. I don't know if you've heard of Muhlenberg in Plainfield, of course, a very famous hospital. [Editor's Note: Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center was a was a hospital in Plainfield, New Jersey that was in operation from 1887 to 2008. It was owned by Solaris Health system at the time of its closure, which left its emergency room and out-patient services open.]

SI: Yes.

CS: I was very, very involved in Muhlenberg because I was there with the community, greeting people to visit the doctors, and I [became] friends with the doctors, with the nurses. I was

becoming part of the Muhlenberg board and I decided to come into meetings and invite me for different things. So, they needed a new opinion about what things can be changed for the Spanish community. They was very good enough to call me and let me know to be part of that group to help them now, and I did that. I helped them then to--how you say?--to do the nursery school. That was one of my--how you say? Oh, I don't know.

SI: Projects?

CS: It was my initiative to have that done. Muhlenberg, we started years and years before the project ever was done. It didn't end. That was one of the biggest things with Muhlenberg.

It broke my heart when Muhlenberg had to be closed. But I was in the group of people who fight to keep it up, at least to keep the emergency room. You know, we have it there, it's going to stay there, and we have the dialysis there. Everything was going to be gone, but we fight for that. I don't know if you hear about so many fights that we had to keep part of Muhlenberg in there. So, we did it. We made it.

I was becoming part of a lot of different organizations and groups from Plainfield and the community and the food and Health Department and the WIC [Women, Infants, and Children] program and working with all kinds of social workers because that would be part of my outreach with my people. They will help me out, so I know if have a case, I can call somebody. Somebody come to me, I don't know, everything how I can do it, but I will call people that I know, a social worker, I call DYFS [Division of Youth and Family Services], I call everybody, and they will help me out. Going to calls to people, I started meeting a lot of lawyers, a lot of judges, a lot of police departments. I became very involved. I don't know if you read about me right now, but I am involved.

I've been involved in a lot with the government. I found out, through friends, that you have to be involved with the politicians too; when you work with the people, you need them. So, I started helping them for all the elections and I was becoming part of the elections group. I work on all the elections for the groups and starting to go to Washington for the meetings, so I've been becoming very good friends with a couple governors. I work very close with Corzine, with McGreevey. So, we were working with them a lot and we know what are all the rules and laws about politicians and the policemen and the judges. I've been able to help and have been involved; I help a lot of the people. [Editor's Note: Jim McGreevey was the governor of New Jersey from 2002 to 2004. Jon Corzine served as the governor of New Jersey from 2006 to 2010.]

SI: I was curious, it sounds like you were able to really do a lot for the bilingual community in Plainfield. Was there ever any resistance, people who did not want to see the Spanish-speaking community do well?

CS: Oh, yes. You find that, especially in the older people, the older community. They don't want it, "Why do you have to help them? Why? They have to help themselves. Why do they have to put bilingual people? They don't need that. Why they spend the money on that?" Sure, you had that a lot. You had a lot of resistance, and people being mean, really mean to you. Like

I say, I never hear their arguments; I just went back to talk to them, "This is the way it is. This is changing, life's changing, you have to go on." So, I try not to fight, especially when all the people, I respect them very much, and if I can't make an argument, I just stay quiet. I just, "That's you, the way you feel. I'm sorry, I hope that one day you understand." That's what I always tell people. I hope you sometime understand what it is about. I don't agree too much with the way it is right now. I'm not really a hundred percent because you can't get things so easy, because you have to work hard for things to get it and to appreciate it. I feel now, people get things very easy, and that I don't think is nice and it's not good for them. That's how I feel.

SI: When did you start the Angels for Action group?

CS: Okay. Before Angels for Action, we had a lot of disasters, like the Bound Brook disaster. So, I got involved, I took a class for disaster preparedness, and I was part of the emergency response team. I work in there, with that team. That night of the disaster, at five o'clock in the morning, I was hearing--I always listened to the news. That's something that every day, it's very important to listen to the news, and I hear on the radio that they were looking for a bilingual person for Bound Brook because they had a lot of Spanish affected. So, I went. Right away, I get up and say to my husband--I have a very supportive husband, thank God. I would never make what I am today without him, because I always did what I really want to do, he would let me do it. Obviously, he wasn't like the approval, you say that word, he knew that he couldn't stop me from doing it. So, he would tell me just, "Okay." I went down. I was able to get only to Middlesex, but then I started walking down to Bound Brook. I was there for at least three days, and we're all helping the victims. I was involved with the emergency team. I was there. To make a story short, working in Bound Brook, we had three thousand people that were displaced. They were in the high school and the churches at that time. So, I worked, let's put it this way, six months in the role, until people got situated. Then, I started to bring food there. [Editor's Note: Hurricane Floyd struck New Jersey in September 1999 and caused widespread flooding, including in Bound Brook, a low-lying area near the Raritan River, where floodwaters crested at record-high levels.]

I made a good friend of mine, American, Jody [Wood] is a wonderful person. At that time, she was living in Bridgewater. I met her, she was giving furniture to the people because the people, [after] four, five months, everything, the people started [being] situated, so they need furniture, they need everything. So, I would bring clothes and food, and my friend would. We made a team together working. We would meet in the house, for tomorrow, "People need this. People need this." So, it was a lot of work, but it was wonderful. We did it. At that time, we met the policeman, a lot of people, all the business.

The mayor was not supportive at all. We had a lot of problems with the mayor of that town. As a matter of fact, maybe this story, one day you're going to read, I took the town to the Justice Department in Washington. I took the mayor and a lot of old inspectors, I brought the case to Washington. So, it was a big case. It was a long case, I know, but I win because they were discriminating. He was very discriminating to the community. There was a lot of Costa Rican community there. [Editor's Note: In 2000, Salavarrieta led an effort to challenge Bound Brook's housing policies, alleging that the policies were discriminating against Hispanic residents. She

helped eight families file suit challenging a zoning ordinance. In 2004, the borough settled the suit with the Department of Justice and agreed to pay over 455,000 dollars.]

SI: Okay.

CS: Through Corzine, who was the senator, he helped me out to be in the case. I go to the Justice Department, and it took a year to investigate it. It was a lot of work. I traveled to Washington every month to bring papers to the Justice Department, all the proof, what is going on in the town, and they send investigators. They investigate for four months, and after that, they got a fine of thirty thousand dollars. It was thirty or forty thousand dollars for the mayor and they had to take classes how to deal with the Latino community. But they don't want Latinos in town. It was not a lot, but it was some Latinos, maybe five thousand in Bound Brook was a lot. [Editor's Note: Jon Corzine represented New Jersey in the United States Senate from 2001 to 2006 and the served as New Jersey's Governor from 2006 to 2010.]

Jody, my friend, and I worked so hard with those people, helping out here and there, and when I was doing the case for Bound Brook, I continued working. This is a day that they called me. When they have a case, they call me for help. It was a long story, but we win the case. The Justice Department did a big fine, and all the people, they got a lot of money for [a penalty] of was being done to them. So, it least two years until everybody got it.

At that time I met this lady, who was wonderful, my friend, and so I ask her to come on the board. I was a board member for El Centro Hispanoamericano in Plainfield. What I was doing there, what I do now, I reach out and helping people and drive people, take them to the doctors, and that was my role in there as the community outreach. I asked her to become part of the board at Central. So, she did come and [got] involved, and she's a wonderful person. To this day, we are very close friends. We're still close friends.

In the meantime, I was part of about four different boards of different agencies. I don't know how I did it, and I appreciate the support that I got from my husband and we got help with babysitters. We worked hard, very hard. When we were working two jobs, I even found the time to take people to different areas. One of the things, when we were working two jobs, the children started growing up. They want to move out of Plainfield. We started school in Plainfield for them, but at that time, it started to be not too good. So, we move out to the next town. It was just better schools. By the time we got down there, we find out the school wasn't really good. So, my husband and I had a talk. We're going to work hard, but we want to put the kids to private schools. It's going to be very hard. We both went to private schools. When I was in Bogotá, it was cheaper to be in private school, and my husband grew up in a private school. So, that was the goal, and we started to work very, very hard. He worked double job and I worked part time with the kids. The kids was really good. We had neighbors and people who help out with them. We would help the neighbors and they would help us. So, that was part of our really, really (word?) struggle, but it was nice. Today, I'm very grateful that we worked hard to put them through private school because they have a wonderful [education]. At that time we went to the town, we had another two kids, so it was already five. I have five children.

I had the time to keep doing [work for] people. I don't know how I [did it]. Looking back, I said, "My God." I think I was [multitasking] at that time because I was able to take somebody to the hospital, go back home and do something, go back to work. It wasn't that easy, but I made it. We made it. You know, it was very good.

Being part of the boards, different boards, everybody called me for different issues. Even the judges call me sometimes. Lawyers call me sometimes, and I was able to make time to do it during that time too. I do more now because I'm more dedicated now.

At that time, I was at Central. I was part of the board at El Centro Hispanoamericano for twenty-six years. A couple years, we were talking about--well, that's one of the issues that had started. I had two of my good friends, who supported me, all of my work, was on the board of Central, the friend that I made in Bound Brook, Jody. First, I did the party for the children there, and after the children, I had grownups come and have a dinner with us, and the homeless people. I always care a lot for the homeless people. I brought it for Christmas and we had a big lunch. We started having them sign up and saying where they live and that way, later on, we can follow with food or something. It called my attention when I was looking over the list at that time, I saw the list, people say under the bridge, under the bridge. I said, "Oh, my God, what is this?" So, I asked them over there, "Who wrote down this?" So, they put their hands up. It was the homeless. I said, "Why do you say you live under the bridge?" So, they explain it to me. They were living under the one house right there by North Plainfield, by the river, and the house has a big underground. So, they were living there, about ten people. I said, "Oh, my God."

At that time, I had jackets for them. That day, right away, we exchanged jackets. People were walking in and I will give it to them, so they have a jacket. I [have] always been lucky enough that people help to raise things, and when I want to get clothes, I give the word out, and people bring it. At that time, we had one little boy from Somerville. For Christmas, he raised maybe four hundred coats. So, we reached out to them, told them that we have the homeless, and they brought it to us. We were able to have coats and jackets and sweaters for people there, because being outside, they were not too good. They were going to sit at a table and I wanted to them to look a little bit decent. So, I always change people before, especially the homeless, you change the top and the jacket. They were sitting there, they were very happy. So, I asked them then, they're telling me where they live. I say, "You live down there?" "Oh yes." I said, "No, you can't." They said, "Yes." I said, "You know what? A couple of you stay, maybe two or three at the end of the dinner, and we're going to bring some food and you go with me." They did it. I went with them and I see what they have there. They have a blanket. They have a sleeping bag. I said, "Oh my God." So, I brought food. It was December 23rd; I'll never forget that. I went home, and I was thinking about, "I sleep in a good bed. I cannot do that, I cannot let the people who are poor, how they can live like that?"

The first thing in the morning, I get up, and I went down to the mayor's office. There was a lady mayor, Sharon Robinson-Briggs; these days, we are very, very good friends. She supported Angels for Action. At that time, I was working with her a lot on all her initiatives for the Latino community. I worked with everybody. I worked with the Black community, with everybody. Whatever they needed, I'm there. I'm not discriminating, but because I'm Latina, most of the people are looking for me, it's for the Latino community. As soon as she got to her office in the

morning, I was there, sitting, waiting for her, and I sit and I talk to her. She said, "You know, Carmen, let's see what we can do. We can find shelters for them today." I said, "Wonderful, but they only be temporary, a couple days there." "It doesn't matter, as long as we get them out of there, that place." So, she called the YMCA and they made me a room for those people. So, we went and picked them up, everybody, brought them to the YMCA. That was the beginning. [Editor's Note: Sharon Robinson-Briggs served as the mayor of Plainfield, New Jersey from 2006 to 2013.]

The rest of the day, I went and was trying to find [an apartment for them]. I say to her, "Really, I cannot leave them on the street. I have to find something." So, I don't know, it come into my mind, I'm going to find an apartment for them. Everybody thought I was out of my mind, "How are you going to do that?" I said, "I'm going to find an apartment." I had to do it. So, I started to reach out to people who had houses in Plainfield, people who I know, because I always recommended people for rent to landlords and things like that. The second day, I reach out to people. It was already after December 24th, December 25th. On the 26th, I had to leave that night, but this landlord, who I reached out to, said, "Carmen, I have a first floor empty and there's three rooms at that time and the living room, but it's empty." He told me how much money I had to bring. He said, "Now give a deposit, just give me the rent money." I talked to the mayor, so she [told] people, friends, and I [told] my friends, and we [told] a lot of people that we need to raise the money. I [told] it to my children, to other family, which they support a lot. That night, I got the deposit money.

We got an apartment. The people don't have to [live] out on the street again. We move them into the apartment. They had no clothes, no mattress, nothing. But I reach out to a couple stores who have mattresses and they donated mattress for us, and the mayor was with me in all that. There's a lot more [to tell]. I had that apartment for [seven months]. We [got them] furniture, everything that they needed. At that time, I went to a restaurant. They donated food every night and we bring a couple people, they help me, they take out the food and we delivered it to them.

My goal was to rehab those people. Everybody was on drugs and alcohol and things like that. We had two of them that they don't want to go anywhere. They want to stay. One of them died at the end of that month. We went looking for him that night, all over, with the mayor all night, and we couldn't find him. He died. In the morning, they found the body by the water. The other one, they changed places so you couldn't find them. The other one, that was by the end of maybe another two months, he also died.

The people who were in the apartment, some of the churches, they started coming to me and help me. Everybody, we got the word out. You ever see in the papers, we put the word out for help from California, from Washington. Everybody send money. The Central was getting all of the things, you know, the Central, because the Central is an organization, of course, that's already set up. They have a secretary. They have a paralegal. They have a paid staff. So, they have everything set up. My only thing was try to reach out, but they will get everything. So, they will set up everything and put everything in place.

The newspaper, I have a good connection with some of the television, Televisión and Telemundo. They always supported me when I did a lot of that. We started many years, maybe

thirty years ago, a lot of cases that I do. I did big cases for people in Plainfield, and they started to cover my [work]. Through them, I was able to make a difference in helping out a lot. So, they started coming, and then one day, the news channel was coming and they wanted to interview me all the time. This happened often, one month, two months, a lot of interviews, a lot of things here and there, how we do it, and they come and take the pictures of the homeless. It's a long story.

Then, by that time, we engaged them in going to rehab. A lot of churches would take them at night. The pastors were taking them for their rehab two hours, three hours. Then, some of them already started going, "Okay, Mrs. Carmen, I'm ready to go back to work," and we found work for them. Factories would open the door for these people because they were workers. They [had] just come into the debt and [become] homeless. They have family in other countries. One by one by one, they started to really work.

One night, we had a board meeting, about three months after working with the group of people and the mayor--and I was having a lot of mayors from other towns coming to talk to me. Even the government reach out and people from the government because I help them in the elections, so they know me. So, they will send a letter with a lot of support. The president of the board say, "I don't think that it's fair that Carmen has been in the news all the time. The Central name is in the news, but nobody else. A director should be the one who has the conference, the meetings, and go and have the conference with the newspapers." So, my friend stood up and say, "No. She's the one who does the work. She should be in there. She's the one who started all this. You all have been taking the money and putting it in the right place and distribute it," because that's how we were getting money, helping all over for the rent. It was two months already, and every month, we [paid] the money. It was money to get them for food, for clothes, everything that we need to pay for these people. So, she really got upset about it.

Especially Univision, the guys from Univision are very good friends of mine, and so for Channel 47, oh my God, we have very, very good people who like what I do. So, they tell me, "Carmen, you can do your own foundation." I told them it's not something you can do from one day to another. You do your own thing, because I don't have to have the permission to do things from El Centro Hispanoamericano. When you belong to the board, you have to have permission to do it, and many times, they say no and they got mad about it. You do all the work, nobody else, because the Central has their own people, but they work in there, just the paperwork.

My friend said, "You know what? That's not fair." My other friends said, "That's not fair. You have to respect what she was doing. She gives you the name, all over the newspapers, but she's the one doing the work." I feel very, very grateful for that, but I don't like to feel like that. I said, "I don't know. If that's the way you feel, you can do it." My friend said no and she walked out of the meeting and say, "That's it, I'm going to ..." The next morning, she say, "You know, Carmen, I'm going to call friends of mine and we're going to start a new organization. This is it." That was the day we started thinking [about] the foundation, [Angels for Action].

SI: Wow.

CS: After El Centro Hispanoamericano got really mad about, "Well, we're not going to keep on doing that anymore," I said, "Well, it's okay." The mayor said no problem, we'll get somebody, one of the churches, to pick up the money, because we don't want to get the money ourselves. [The] administrating [can be done by] one of the churches. Then, I continued there, in the Central. I stayed there, so I continued doing that. That wasn't a good environment, but I stay there.

We keep this apartment about seven months, until everybody was going back to work and they go back to sending money to the families, and some people had their families here, some of the guys, and they go back to being a provider for the families. That was very nice.

There was a lot of people involved helping me. This mayor was a special [person]. Sharon Robinson-Briggs, oh my God, she was a big, big community outreach who helped me out. She helped anybody who called to her. She was mayor for two terms. She lost four years ago, so she's been out. Even though she lost, she became part of Angels for Action. She's one of the board members for Angels for Action. [Editor's Note: Sharon Robinson-Briggs served as the mayor of Plainfield, New Jersey from 2006 to 2013.]

SI: That is good.

CS: My friends say, "This is it, we're going to do something." They started investigating. They started doing it. They [asked] some people to help her out with paperwork and everything. A month later, they already had a lot of steps to become a foundation, which I have no idea how they were doing it. They were doing this, they were doing that, because I am involved with the people but not involved with any paperwork and things like that, not too much. We started to have meetings to pick out the name, between the three of us who were the founders. It's another guy who was a photographer, who was always taking pictures of me. He got involved too and he was there, meet outside and he gave me his number. I thought it was just a dream. I never thought it was becoming real. Just doing the work like you have meetings and things like that, we did it. In the beginning, we used to be Angels in Action and we want to start, but we had no money. We don't have nothing else. We just have the good will to work with the people.

SI: Yes.

CS: So, I wanted to start the English classes for these people, especially for the day laborers and the people that already were working, they want to learn English. At one point, I sit in the park with them. I'm not a good teacher, but I tried. I got somebody to come into the school and one of the students come to help me out to sit in the park with them, trying to give them some homework for English and a couple words, how to go to work.

The other person who was part of Angels for Action, the guy, he had a friend in the bank, and I know him [Ivan Burgos, the branch manager]. I have my account there too for many years. We walked into the bank and he said to me, "You know, so and so was here talking about you, that you want to have classes in English. You come and I have big tables in here and we do ESL classes. The PNC Bank does citizenship classes in there. After that class, you could use them for your English classes. I even will help you to teach it." He even started helping them to teach

English. So, that's how we started at the bank, talking to them. We did it for about two months, every Saturday, and we were finished by twelve-thirty, when they closed the banks on Saturdays. He was very supportive. They had this little house. It was closed for years and years. Nobody used it, because they let people use it, they allowed somebody, and they were abusing, to be using it for different things that wasn't supposed to be. It was right there in the parking lot. One day, I talked to him. I said, "Listen, what do they do in there?" He said, "Nothing, the bank will not doing nothing because they did some bad things in there." I said, "Why don't you talk to them? Maybe we can do the classes in there?" That is how we started.

SI: Okay.

CS: The guy who was helping us, Norman, he say to them, "That would be good. Let's do it. We will clean it out." At that time, already the papers of the foundation was coming out for Angels in Action. Everything was coming out, and he said, "Well, the only thing, it has to be fixed and you have to have insurance." We said, "Well, we'll raise the money for the insurance or something." That's how we started talking and talking, and he talked to the corporation for the bank and he presented how we've been doing it, how I've been working with the community, that I will take good care of the house forever. A month [later], they sent me the letter, saying, "We agree. We will lend it to you to use it." Do you believe that? It was a miracle, and that is where we are right now. It's been twelve years. [Editor's Note: Angels for Action, located at 209 West Second Street in Plainfield, is a non-profit organization that provides free education and community services. Angels for Action was founded in 2009 by Jody Wood, Carmen Salavarrieta, Norman Ortega, Maria Carrasquillo, and Alejo Alonso.]

SI: Wow.

CS: Then, we moved in. We started cleaning before. It was very bad, so cleaning before and painting and doing a little work here and there. So, they do the big maintenance, they do it, but the little maintenance, we had to keep on cleaning and painting. The little things, we had to do it. A month later, we started to go in there. We used the old furniture. We used the old things that they had, until we were able to raise money. The classes, we started there, all the classes. That was the first thing we did, taught English there. Then, I found out one of my teachers was teaching school at night for ESL. I went to church one day, to my church, and I saw him. I started talking to him, and he tell me, "What are you doing, Carmen, here?" So, I told him. He said, "Carmen, I will help you out." Since then, it's been eight years, he's been helping me. He's one of my teachers, you believe that? At night.

SI: Wow.

CS: He give me four hours a night. We started in September, from September to July, we do classes. He will do one day and night. He's a teacher. He has eight years a teacher at Piscataway.

SI: Wow.

CS: He's a retired person now, but he still do the work for me. We're very good friends, and his wife is the one who do all my reports. She started doing all my paperwork. I've been having that, I'm supposed to be down for Washington because, all this time, I've been involved in so many things. I got really involved in [so much] there. I cannot name it; I will be here for weeks telling you. But we have a lot of records of that. So, that's when we started doing more things, and I continued doing my work.

So, I was grateful to the Central, and I continued with Central. Maybe six months later, a couple months or maybe later, three on the board said that it was not good for me to be there because I was doing the same work that they were doing, but they weren't doing the work that I was doing. But he say that. I was--oh my God--I don't know how to use the word right now, it went out of my mind. So, they told me that I had to step out. I said, "Okay, no problem."

SI: Conflict?

CS: [What]?

SI: Was conflict the word?

CS: Conflict, yes, a conflict.

SI: Okay.

CS: Conflict of interest, yes. I step out, and twenty-eight years I was there with them. But one of the board members, the chairman of the board, at the time, he knows what I've been doing. We were very good friends. He said, "You know, Carmen, I'm going to help you out to get your board. Now that you have an organization, you ought to have a board right now." Jody knows, my friend knows, but we have to put it together. We started doing it. These days, he's part of the board there, and he helps me. He's a lawyer. He's part of the Central. He told them at Central, "I'm going to help Carmen because she helped us a lot all these years. If you have a problem, let me know." But nobody say nothing, so he just continued. But I always work with the Central. What we do is, they help me out sometimes with food. So, they give me food because they also give it for one day a week. If I need something from them, they also have a lawyer, so I say, "I have a case here. I need a lawyer for domestic violence." Right away, they help me out. I call, and they take this person. They fill out papers for me. They do immigration, help me with immigration. We work together, a very good partnership. So, when they have somebody, the cases they're not doing, like somebody needs to find a job or somebody have an accident in a job or they're not paid the money for their work, they send the people to me.

SI: Okay.

CS: We continue a very good relationship all the time. The same thing with the clinic. The same thing with the [Council of Catholic Women]. So, we continue a good relationship through the years.

SI: Okay.

CS: So, that's what it is, and that's what I've been doing until now. It's a lot more things in between. There's always difficult things, like with this new mayor. He never agree with me because I worked with the other mayor. He tried to give me a very hard time, a very hard time. Like with him, I have a situation, and I respect him. He calls me sometimes for things that they needed for the community and I go in there and I help out. When he become the mayor, he don't want to talk to me at all because I don't support him. But I went to him and I say, "Listen, you're the mayor. I want to respect you and this town. We have to work together for the community. So, anything you need from me, I am here, and I hope that if I need you, I can reach out because I always reach out to city hall for something."

I implemented a lot of programs for the Latino community in the city hall. I was the one who set up a desk in the front to give information. I did it for voluntary for one year in there, and they become a paid position for somebody. That was one of my roles in there, to have somebody to give information. Most of the departments, with the mayor, I was able to get a lot of bilingual people to help out because they never had it. They always have American-speaking people. They don't know how much it was needed. By doing the outreach to them, I was able to introduce the information that they need more bilingual people.

With this mayor, one of the situations that was in Plainfield, we see that all the time, many, many years, today we have the problems and they have been there for many years, the people being beat up. They attack a lot of the Latinos in the street because they want to rob them. [Editor's Note: In the spring and summer of 2004, at least seventeen Hispanic men were beaten in and near Plainfield. Samuel Aguillar Jimenez was killed in May 2004. ("In a Divided Town, a Question of Hate, or Cash?" by Damien Cave, *The New York Times*, October 24, 2004.)]

SI: Okay.

CS: It's been going on for a long time. I had a big case. I cannot go through that because it's a long case, but I was able to make a difference in the town at that time. We're talking about maybe twenty years ago, or less than twenty years, there was a big case. They were beating up people on every corner. They were there waiting for their ride, and then a group, African American, young guys, would come and beat them up. Then, they steal all their wallets, whatever they have. They would not come to the police because usually the people, not only the Latino, ethnic people are afraid of the police. We're coming from cultures where the police do nothing, and so they [would] not go to the police all the time for cases. So, they never want to go. They would come to me to go to the doctors, to go to the hospital, people beat up bad, with the bats. They were using the bats. So, they break the neck of somebody. There's no need, just steal everything and run, but, no, they would do damage to the people.

SI: Yes.

CS: I was to the point where we had thirty cases, and I was very upset because I would go to the police and talk to the chief of the police because I always go to the top. I go to the middle and they don't do nothing, so I just go to the top. I go to the chief of the police, who was Spanish at

the time, and tell him the case. He want everybody to come to him and let him know, and they don't want to come. They're afraid to death.

SI: Yes.

CS: It happens to be that I hear, Trenton sent me a notice, the attorney general was going to have a meeting with the community, the Hispanic community, in some part of Trenton. No, it was at Rutgers at that time. They had a meeting right there where they had the meetings--what's it called, the community center? So, he come into that, you know, the community center, big, by Cook. It's not Cook; it's by the Route 1, what do you call that center? I forgot right now. The big meetings are held over there. We go to a lot of meetings, three or four a year, for the Latinos for different things. Also, they empower women over there, the progress for women.

SI: Oh, at Eagleton? [Editor's Note: The Eagleton Institute of Politics is a political analysis center that was established in 1956 at Rutgers. It is housed in historic Wood Lawn Mansion on the Douglass Campus. The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics, is nationally recognized as the leading source of scholarly research and current data about women's political participation in the United States.]

CS: Yes, I'm part of that group. I am involved with it. At that time, he was coming, so I told myself, "You know what? This is a good opportunity for me to speak out because I don't know what to do." I reach out. At the Union County sheriff, they say that has to be the local police who handle those cases. We have a meeting; we went down there. It was a long meeting, all day, where he was talking about that case and things like that. So, I got to the point that people have questions, so that was my [turn to speak], "I had this case in Plainfield. People reach out to me, they [were] beaten, attacked by a group of people; it seemed to be the same group all the time. I go to the police. They don't want to listen." Oh, my God, he get up from his chair and come to me. He said, "You know what? Don't leave. Right after the meeting, I want to talk to you because I want to hear what's going on." I was so lucky. That's how we started fighting for that. Right after that, I talked to him, I showed him, I have pictures of the people in the hospital, oh my God, bad and everything. That was on one day.

To me, God put things in my hands in different ways all the time. Going into Thursday morning, at five o'clock in the morning, I got a phone call from people that I know from the Central. Her husband was at Robert Wood Johnson. He was dying, because he was beat up in Plainfield by this group of people. They explain to me, neighbors saw it, so they would say it was the same group that had been going on. To me, at that time, I accuse him, and I say to the chief of the police, I said, "You are not listening to this case." He say, "No, it's not. You always come and you say that," because I always speak out whatever I was thinking. [Editor's Note: This is referring to the June 10, 2004 beating of Oscar Romero-Figueroa, which left him partially paralyzed and without the use of his right arm. He was beaten with a baseball bat. The assault took place in North Plainfield.]

SI: Yes.

CS: I went to the hospital at five o'clock and I see this poor guy, laying in there. Oh, my God, his whole head was destroyed.

SI: Oh, wow.

CS: The doctor was giving him just cup of water because he was bleeding very bad. It was internal. They told his wife. I stood there with his wife. You know what I did right away? I called the police. I said, "You [have to get] involved in this case." "Oh, it wasn't Plainfield. It was the limits of Plainfield, not Plainfield." So, no Plainfield police are there. I said, "It's the same people who was hitting and attacked these people in Plainfield," but they don't listen to me. So, I beg to them, "Please call the chief and let him know." They said, "We're going to do it." But I have his cell number. I have a lot of communication with him. So, by seven o'clock, I call his cell phone; he don't answer. I leave him messages.

You know what I did by eight o'clock? I call Channel 47, 41. By eleven o'clock, I have all these channels in front of the hospital. I had Channel 7, Channel 5. So, he call me, he was very mad, "How can you do that to Plainfield, Carmen?" I said, "How can you not call me? I call you. I gave you the chance. I didn't counter you." By that time, he got a phone call. So, I called Trenton. I called Trenton and left a message to the attorney general and told him what happened. You know that he sent somebody to the hospital, at that time. So, the mayor from Plainfield come in, he was so mad at me, "How come you did this? How can you operate like that?" I started my voice at that time. When I started something, I will not--how do you say?--stay back now.

SI: Yes.

CS: Because they thought I was destroying Plainfield. It was in the newspapers, it was in everything. By that time, this poor guy was almost dying, between life and death. By eleven o'clock, he had a big stroke and they do a surgery. They told him he would never make it. Thank God, he was very bad, but he was still alive. It was a long story, I wish I can tell you a lot, but it was a long, long [story].

By this time, all the media put attention, and even Plainfield got so mad about [it]. The [attorney] general, he got involved. At that time, he called everybody. A week later, he called the meetings in Plainfield. He come to Plainfield. The teachers in Plainfield with me called attention to the police what was going on.

In the meantime, five days after this attack, I went to the chief of the police, Chief Parenti, in North Plainfield, and he asked me all the information. I told him, "These guys have been doing it in Plainfield, the same thing. They attacked people with the bat." So, they started looking. They put people in civilian clothes around. They started looking. They went to attack somebody five days later in North Plainfield, and they catch all of them, five, one driving the car and four was attacking people.

SI: Wow.

CS: Oh, yes, I was so happy. The newspapers were there. It was all over the newspapers, "Plainfield never catches people, and North Plainfield did." Oh, my God, they were so mad with me. The chief was really, really angry. Oh, he would call me and tell me, "How come you did this?" The mayor in Plainfield, at that time, was a guy, Mr. McWilliams. I would do what I had to do. In the meantime, the guy in the hospital survived, but with the stroke that he had between the surgeries, he was paralyzed, upper body, but he was surviving. He was on machines. He was breathing on the machines for about three weeks, in a coma. [Editor's Note: Albert T. McWilliams was the mayor of Plainfield from 1998 to 2005.]

SI: Wow.

CS: He was in the hospital for three months at that time. In the meantime, he was followed by the news all the time, and this is becoming big. So, when the attorney general got involved, the police [caught them]; already, the guys were in detention. It was in Somerset [County], not Union [County]. I got all the cases together and I started bringing them to the police and they started bringing everything. So, I was part of all the investigations' information. So, when Oscar Romero-[Figuerola], the guy who was [beaten], woke up, he started to talk a little, he was becoming part of that. He was, you know, with a stroke, he was limited to talk. It was very, very sad the way he became. That was the way to really stop all this abuse. He was becoming better, much better, much better, he gave more information, more information. Usually, these guys would get a [hearing] day and they will give a--how do you say, get out with the bail?

SI: Yes.

CS: These guys, thank God, with all the information they had, they never got them out. Thank God, because they would've fled.

SI: Wow.

CS: They used to be in jail all these months, until they were to be coming [to] trial. We were part of the trial. Oscar Romero, when he was discharged from the hospital six months later, they want to send him home in a wheelchair. I spoke to the doctors. I had a meeting with a lot of the doctors, the big doctors, and they say he will never be walking if he don't have [help]. He don't have insurance. He was an immigrant with no insurance or nothing.

SI: Yes.

CS: They told me that and took the letter to say that, "We're going to send him home in a wheelchair." So, the wife said to me, "Carmen, what am I going to do? I have a little apartment. There's not even room for the wheelchair. What are we going to do with him? He's still half paralyzed in the mouth and face on one side." He needed a rehab. So, they call me one morning, they say they want me to sign the papers. I said, "You're not going to take him." I spoke already to a couple lawyers, a couple people to ask advice, whatever we should do about it. So, they told me, "You know, just tell them you're not going to take him. They have to send him to a rehab center. They have to find someplace where they will take him." So, I did that. By ten o'clock in the morning, I was there, I told, "Don't sign nothing. She's not going to take

him. You have to help us to find a place." They say no, no, no, all day long. They got through with a meeting to the people, they say, "No, they're not going to have him." They can't find a place.

Well, I called the news, Channel 47, they are so wonderful, and they started putting in the news, saying, "This guy is being discharged and he cannot go home." In the middle of that, by three o'clock, they say, "Well, you have to take him." I said, "We're not going to take him." You know, if you refuse to take him, you don't sign papers, you cannot take the person; they cannot put him out on the street. They continued, continued, and by four-thirty, somebody from the hospital come to me, we were there. By that time, I had a lot of people supporting me there. I have a lawyer there with me who was just helping me, things like that. They started saying, "We got a phone call from three rehab centers not too far from the area." So, I said, "Okay. We will meet with them." They come out to the hospital. They sit down. One of them say, "I want a check for ten thousand dollars to put down, and we will take him." I said, "Who will pay that money? Nobody has that money."

SI: Yes.

CS: Then, the other ones say something else. I think they want three thousand, but it was only for one month. We [would not] agree to anything. We said, "No, we don't have that money. We need somebody to help out." In the meantime, we were going to try to get [Victims of Crime] assistance in Newark to help him out. At that time, I know a little bit already to work with the cases, so I know the Victims of the Crime in Newark, they will help out those people who have been abused, they are victims of crime. One of the agents said, "You know what? We can do something. Come and you will agree with us that they're going to give a ...". How do you say? Oh, my God, the word has gone from my mind. The TV will put the name in there for us. [Editor's Note: The New Jersey Victims of Crime Compensation Office established by the Criminal Injury Compensation Act of 1971 provides financial support to victims of a criminal act.]

SI: Yes.

CS: That's how you say.

SI: Yes.

CS: In the newspapers, we put a name. They're going to come to the center and work with the name in the newspapers. I said, "It's so difficult. I cannot agree." I call my friends from the newspaper; at that time, it was the *Courier News* [and] *The Star-Ledger* was very good about [coverage]. They come over, my friend from the TV, everybody was alert here, "What are we going to do?" They come up and they offer that they will mention the center in the news and everything, what they were doing, and they were going to follow this story [of] him until he recuperated. So, they say, "Okay, that's what we need. Well, we will take him. From then on, just give us a check." I think they asked for two thousand dollars at that time. One of the guys, somebody, I think it was the lawyer, said, "I will lend you the money and I will give it." So, that was that.

That day, they took him out to that place. That was the Bridgewater Rehab Center, right on [Route] 22. Thank God for that, because this guy was there six months, and in six months, they did good work. He really was able to walk. The right hand, he cannot use the right hand. They teach him how to eat with the other hand and how to do things in six months. He really recuperated very well.

SI: Wow.

CS: It was very, very good. Then, they got [paid] by the Victims of Crime. They got [paid] money and things like that. So, I think at that time, they did good, very good. I visited him. Then, when he got out of there, I visited him in school. He went to the computer classes in Plainfield that Union County opened up. They have a computer class. They open it for him, and he was there for about two years. He knows how to do computer work now, so he travels with the computers. He [is] able to drive cars. He rehabbed, and that passed maybe after two years.

But, in the meantime, these people were in jail for a year, and then we started doing all the court dates. We bring pictures. We were able to bring him after. These people were charged, everybody got twelve, fourteen, sixteen years in jail. So, I was very, very proud. I was there every morning. That was Somerset County. Thank God, I was very grateful. In Somerset County, I have very, very good stories about the police department there and the sheriff and everybody. They were very helpful. They really care about doing things right away.

To this day, we have a lot of good relationship with the chief of the police department. He helped me a lot, a lot. Every time I have a problem, I go to him. I can call him. He had meetings. He got me involved with the sheriff in Somerset, part of the community outreach of the sheriff officers in Somerset. At that time, I still had a lot of people who were beaten up and had people who were hurt and being able to help them through the system. I [even] got him the papers. He became a resident. He became a citizen now. When he became a resident, Social Security started giving him a pension. He's got a pension now. I have about three or four cases of people who got pensions and got papers through assistance when they were victims of crimes. I have so many cases. I have so many things that I don't want to tell you no more.

SI: Yes.

CS: Okay, this is it.

SI: No, I appreciate it. Let me pause for one second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Okay, we are back on.

CS: Yes.

SI: Okay, please tell us a little bit about your children.

CS: With the children, we have five children. I told you already how we did it. We were very happy working hard for them. They [went] to the good schools. They all went to Catholic [grammar] school to Catholic high school. The boys went to the Saint Joseph's in Metuchen, which is a beautiful school, and the girls went to Mount Saint Mary's ... [Editor's Note: Saint Joseph's High School is a private Catholic all-boys high school that was established in 1961. The campus is located in Edison and Metuchen, New Jersey. Mount Saint Mary Academy is a private Catholic all-girls high school in Watchung, New Jersey. It was established in 1908.]

SI: Wow.

CS: ... Which is the biggest school and a very good school. So, they all [become] very, very good [people]. They all graduated from high school. They all graduated from college. Today, they are all professional. They all help me out with my outreach programs. They all put a little here, whatever they put, they put money. My little one graduated with honors for IRT. She's married. She's a graphic designer. She [does] all my websites and everything, my little daughter. She's a wonderful person.

SI: Wow.

CS: She's got a big job right now.

SI: That is great.

CS: My other children, they all collaborated, whatever they need in Christmas. I have two daughters married. I have four grandchildren, which is wonderful. They are in college or they graduated from college. But all my kids, they all graduated from a wonderful college and they are wonderful [people]. They help me out and they supported me in whatever I do, whatever I want. That's one thing I left out; I traveled every year. I started seventeen years ago; I travel every January. I go to different countries to be in touch with children.

SI: Wow.

CS: That was part of my goal that I want to do in life, because I remember that it's so nice to have little toys when you don't have nothing. So, I go all over, all the countries, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, I've been going to all the countries, Mexico. I [went] to Honduras. Every year, I pick out one country in January. January 6th, that is my date that I bring at least 150, two hundred toys for children. So, I organize over there with people for the community. They [bring] together a lot of children in towns. A lot of kids say, "This is my first [toy]. I have no toys for Christmas." I went to Mexico. It made me cry when I went to this part of Mexico, and these kids told me, "I don't have no shoes," and I brought shoes for them. I bring clothes and shoes. Whatever I can put together, I bring. I always bring at least ten boxes of toys and clothes for them. One time, I went to Santo Domingo, and I brought twenty boxes. I got twenty boxes of toys, big boxes of toys, for the kids. So, that's one thing that I was able to [do]. Now, I'm starting to put it together. I'm going to go in January. These past two years, with the pandemic, I've not been able to do it, but I did send the boxes to them. I did send it to the

country. That way, they give it to the kids. But this year, it's going to be January. I'm going to travel. I hope I'll be able to. I think I want to go to Guatemala to bring toys to the children. So, that's what my goal is.

My kids help me out. They want to buy the tickets. I get the toys from the police department, from the fire department, they give me the toys, the donations, and I buy other things and I send my kids for it to get. In Christmas, when I do my Christmas party for the children at my place at Angels for Action, they all come and help, my grandchildren. I have two daughters married, so one of my son-in-law is Santa Claus. They all help, so they all give me a hand. We are a very close family. That's a blessing for me, because that's what I wanted. I wish all that, but I never had a family. I always thought and I prayed [to] God, when I have a family, I'm going to keep it very close, and they are very close. They support each other. They supported their children. When they were in college, they would call one another, you know, "Uncle, how [do] we do this?" Or, "Aunt, what [should] I do?" Things like that, they're really supportive.

They have supported me in everything, and they pay for some of the--I have no grant. I have no money for Angels for Action. Everything is done by just people who want to help. My kids pay and do everything that I need for rest of that. It's wonderful to have that. I'm very, very blessed for that. I don't think people would believe today because people say most of the kids, they don't care, but, no, my kids are very, very special. God has been blessing them also. They all work. They all have good jobs and they live very well. Two are married. They have their own families. One is married [to] a lawyer, an American guy. The other is married [to] an officer who's a wonderful person. We have a very, very good relationship with the family. We have become like the king and the queen of the family, so we really love it. They're very good with their father. My husband is wonderful. He's very supportive of everything I do. You cannot do this if you don't have that support. Other people, I have a lot of friends, like I say, people all over; the government, the politicians. Senator Menendez is a very good friend of mine. Through him, I've been able to help so many people out. [Editor's Note: Bob Menendez has represented New Jersey in the United State Senate since 2006.]

SI: Wow.

CS: Yes, so lot so support. So, I don't want to leave that out, but that's the biggest thing in my life, what I'm becoming right now. It's not been easy. It's very hard, but [I'm] here.

SI: Well, that is remarkable.

CS: Thank you, thank you.

SI: Going back to your work in Plainfield, I have read some articles that you were involved in the voter ID issue.

CS: Oh, [yes].

SI: Can you talk a little bit about that?

CS: Okay. Doing all this outreach, people come all the time [to] me. They cannot cash a check because they don't have an ID. They cannot take papers from, you know, they go to the post office and the identification, they cannot get the papers. They go to register children for the birth certificate. They cannot because they do not have any identification. So, I come up with an idea that I want to do something. I don't have no idea that Trenton, they had an initiative for IDs at that time. At that time, it was Mr. Levy. He was wonderful, the [attorney] general. I don't know if you remember him.

SI: Yes.

CS: He was so supportive [of] me. I went to his office. You know, I started walking into Trenton, into the government offices, like it was my house. [laughter] I just come into the office and talk to them, because I worked both of the houses. I attended a lot of committees for the government house and for Trenton and all that. I have a lot of pictures of that. So, I walked into the office. I asked him, I say, "Plainfield has a big issue. I guess all the towns do, but Plainfield to me, I see it right now. People don't have identifications or they don't [have] the passports or they expired." When they rob them, they rob all the papers. They take all the papers from them. At that time, the police was coming to me with pictures of dead people, "Carmen, will you find anybody who know these people?" They give a picture of the body. The hospitals will call me and say, "Carmen, we have somebody who died here or is dying and we couldn't find the family." They just give me the picture because they don't have identification. When I went to him, I mentioned all that to him. I said, "Listen, we have this problem. Is there any way we can do something?" He said, "Carmen, we already approved an identification program in Trenton, in Mercer County. It's been approved for Mercer County and they are doing it." So, he gave me the name of the agency. He say, "Call her, Maria." It was Maria, one lady who was running it. "Call her. She's doing it and she will tell you. Whatever you need from me, I will sign for you."

I went to her, and she say, "The first thing, you have to get approved for the town." It had to be from the city council, or the mayor can sign the papers, a decision approved by the mayor. Or you can do county-wide, Union, but it's different. It had to be through the sheriff. So, I said, "Let me start with town first. I really need the town, and from then, I will reach out." So, I reach out to the mayor, and she was my friend. She said, "That's a wonderful idea, Carmen. I will help you out with whatever I can."

So, I went to Trenton, me and another volunteer who was working with me, at that time, helping me out. We come to Trenton, and we took the classes how to do the IDs. We were there a couple times a week, maybe three weeks, maybe two times a week, go there and look at how they were doing it. It was shown to me. She was willing to show me all the paperwork for everything they do, how they do it, to make a serious paper, and that would be something to compromise between us and the town and police department. It had to be approved by the police department. That way, when they see that ID, there would be no comment from somebody and you had to take. The only way you can do it is if they bring you any kind of identification from their country and the proof of the address they live in Plainfield, because that proves [they live] in Plainfield. The police have to know, so you had to engage the police, the fire, everybody, in one meeting to let them know what you're going to do. That way, they all know and see what

they feel. So, that was the mayor's job to get everybody together. So, the mayor said, "No problem. I really want to do it."

The mayor got all that, and she brought it to the city council meeting. At that time, she put it in the minutes for the city council. The city council president was the one who's the mayor now, so he doesn't want it. He says, "No, that is not going to be done in Plainfield. That is not right. That is not official identification." It's not official, but it's something for the people. She said, "We know how it's done and how they're going to do it. Carmen will not do nothing that is illegal. She will do it the right way all the time." That's true. They know me. I try to be the most honest I can, and they know that I am an honest person. If I thought something, it's because that's what it is, and I will not work on something that I feel is dishonest. So, he say no. The city council people say, "You know, that would be good." He said, "No and no." They cannot pass it because he says no. You know what she did? The next morning, she called me, she said, "Carmen, he said no, but you know I'm going to approve it myself. I'm going to overpower him." So, we called the newspapers. We call the media. He was so mad, oh, my God. He was really angry. [Editor's Note: The microphone is not picking up clear audio.]

[TAPE PAUSED]

CS: Okay. Did you hear when I say that she got everybody together?

SI: Yes.

CS: Okay. That was the day that we say, "Okay, next week, we're going to start it," and the newspaper put it out, the Spanish paper put it out. By the next week, I had a hundred. The following week, it was two hundred. I had to do it three days a week because I had to get more people to help me out. [Editor's Note: Beginning in 2013, the community identification (ID) program in Plainfield was established and administered by Angels for Action to grant photo IDs to undocumented residents of Plainfield. The IDs are recognized by the Plainfield Police Department, along with schools, libraries, pools, local hospitals and health clinics, and PNC and Bank of America. There is now a separate Plainfield Municipal ID Program.]

SI: Wow.

CS: We started bad. We didn't have the money for the machines. My children put all the money together, between all of them, my five kids, and they bought the machine, which was over three thousand dollars at that time.

SI: Wow.

CS: They thought we were going to take the money from the city. That was the argument that he put into the city council people, "She's going to use the money from the city." I wasn't thinking that. I know it was going to be my cost, and I know I have to work to find that money.

We did it and we started the program. We had a lot of people coming in. We got to the point that we had, oh, many, many people we were serving. The police were very happy. There was

identification and that we'd know there was rules. Everybody started getting it, oh wow. So, we got that, but it happened to be six months later was when the mayor, Sharon [Robinson-Briggs], lose the position because it was two terms and he win. [Editor's Note: Adrian O. Mapp has served as the mayor of Plainfield since 2014.]

A month later, after he won, one day I had three hundred people outside waiting in a line to do their ID cards, because he sent the police, the chief of the police, and one of the sergeants to close out the program. He say, "She wants to topple me. Now, I'm going to topple her, and you're going to close the program." So, I don't want an argument. He's the mayor, right? So, I said to them, to the police, "You know what? You know me, I'm not going to fight with you. It's okay. Just let me finish these people tonight." They said, "No." I said, "Okay." So, I told the people, I say, "Something has come up. We're going not going to be able to do it. I am going to let you know when." I just sent everybody home, and oh my God, everybody was terrified of the police. When police show up and I said, "No, no, you cannot do that."

I go to the chief, "You know what? Monday morning," it was a Friday, "Monday morning, I'm going to call a meeting to the city. I'm going to call a meeting to all of you into the meeting, everybody, the police, and the power," because working there, I didn't have the right to ask for the meeting. So, I did that. Also, I had the support--how do you call it? His second assistant. How do you call it? I forgot the name.

SI: Vice mayor or something?

CS: No, I ask for the meeting. I had the meeting with the mayor. So, I called the secretary, I say, "I want to meet with everybody." So, they're sending us to the police, the chiefs everybody. The assistant of the mayor, he was a very good friend of mine, and he supported the ID card. So, he started right away. He say, "You know, we have a meeting coming up." By Wednesday, they call me in a meeting with him. I went with my friend. The mayor cannot come. She is out of the office, so she cannot come with me. But I had two of the board members come with me. It was another two girls. We walked into this room in the city hall and we had seven guys. The head of the department, he wasn't there, only his assistant was there, the chief, the second in command for the mayor. So, we were there. He supported me. So, I brought with my papers. I said, "We did all this. I went to the classes." The mayor signed it up. We presented the program, "This is how I do it." This is how I presented it to everybody. They [looked at] it then, and the mayor assistant says, "Carmen, it's a wonderful program. What does everybody think?" They say, "Yes." "What everybody think?" "We're going to continue." They say, "Carmen, continue." Oh, and three other city council members were there, and they say, "Continue with your program. Even if he don't want it, continue. We approve it." That's how we continued.

We've been doing it since then. But then, he was coming for reelection, you know, the election this year. Four years ago, he won reelection. So, he decided to open an ID program in the city hall. I went all over. I went to a lot of towns. Newark has the ID program, because I meet with the mayor. That was my goal to have the towns doing it, all the towns, because I only do it for one town. It's approved, but the mayor had to be the one in the town. If the chair is approved, you can do it for the county. I talked to the mayor maybe five times until I convinced him to have the IDs. I went to Elizabeth. I went to Roselle Park. I went to Perth Amboy. I even was

part of the meetings for the ID program for the mayor of New York. I presented what we were doing, how helpful it was, how much people was really, really helped with this ID. That's how those IDs came in [existence]. You see they are right now.

A month ago, he decided he wanted to do IDs for the high school parents and he come in again and he say he want to shut my program down. I reach out to everybody, I said, "You have to call him because he's not going to stop me from doing the IDs. The people need it." Two or three days later, his assistant called off everything and sent me a message, a text message said, "I'm sorry. We made a mistake. You continue with your program." This is a big fight over that, but we're still doing it.

We do it every Friday. We do it, and people need it. People go to the hospital to register a child, and they [are not] allowed to register when they have a baby because they don't have identification. So, they call me from the hospital, "Carmen, we need the parents' identification. Are you doing it?" They send it to me right away to have identification. The hospitals know. The clinic takes people all the time; that the best way the clinic is having the right people. People sometimes go to the clinic with different names and different addresses. Well, they don't take anybody who don't have an ID. If they don't have a regular ID, with the address, they come to me and get an ID.

It's been very good, wonderful. That's what we're doing. It's not making money. Whatever people pay, it's just a little bit to go support the materials. A year ago, we had to get a new machine. The machine was very old, and it's been eight years that I do the program. We had to get a new machine. We were able to raise the money, and all my kids [gave] money, especially one, I have one son who put money into the foundation. He reached out to the brothers from college, and they all put their money here and there. I was able to get it, because the machines are four thousand dollars. Some are five thousand dollars. We're doing it. It's not been easy. It's been hard.

The funny thing is, when he needs something, he call me and say, "I need your opinion about the community, this and that." I go there and I go to the meetings, so I can say hello and we talk and things like that, but I know he doesn't agree with me. He knows the mayor is part of Angels for Action and I don't think he likes that, but that's the way we do it.

They wanted me to run for city council in Plainfield. They all asked me. People asked me. Of course, I cannot do it, and I say, "No, I don't want to work for no entity, even the government." I say, "No, because if I work for somebody, I have to be dedicated to the job. I cannot fight the way I fight now." I'd be fired, like for the Bound Brook case. They had the mayor out for discrimination. For the Oscar Romero case, I had the chief of the police, the [attorney] general fired him. He took him out of the job, because of what I was doing and what I was accusing him. I've been able to do things. Even I accused the police departments, I accuse for whatever they're doing wrong, I'm not afraid to go and I have the support. Should I take a job, the politician job or any of those jobs, I'll not be able to fight the way I'm fighting now. Now, the way I do it, I am free, and I have my family going on now and more. I have a lot of support. I want to close. What do you think? Should we stop here?

SI: Yes. Well, I appreciate all your time. It really has been fascinating to learn about all your good work and how you really took a struggle and made it something good for everybody. I am going to conclude now. Thank you very much.

CS: Thank you very much for listening to me and the things that I went over. Thank you, Shaun, I appreciate it. Have a wonderful day.

[Editor's Note: Carmen Salavarieta added the following conclusion of the interview.]

At the building that PNC Bank so generously provided for Angels for Action, classes have been held covering citizenship, computer skills, literacy, Spanish (for those such as firefighters who could better do their jobs when able to directly communicate with people in need, especially in Plainfield, where there is such a high concentration of people who do not speak English), and finally ESL, English as a Second Language, classes to help these newcomers be better equipped to navigate their new country. We are fortunate to have wonderful teachers who volunteer their time to instruct these classes.

In what became an unprecedented experience for all people worldwide, the pandemic turned everything upside down. People were in lockdown. Most, except for essential workers, couldn't leave their homes, couldn't work, and had difficulty providing for their families.

All people have three basic needs--shelter, food and clothing. While there was a stay of evictions, clothing and much more so food became a primary driving force. During the pandemic, with food security an issue, Carmen solicited food from United Way, the YMCA, several dozen local restaurants and Union County for distribution to those in need. She partnered with an Indian group based in Edison, New Jersey, which dropped off two hundred hot meals each Tuesday and Thursday at the Plainfield headquarters.

There were still many other pressing needs beyond food. Carmen solicited diapers for both babies and toddlers, as well as older adults. When needed, walkers, wheelchairs and canes were provided. Carmen sought monetary donations to purchase medicine for those who lost their insurance or didn't have any. She provided further outreach by taking people to medical appointments.

There have been many others behind the scenes who assisted Carmen in accomplishing these goals. Without the backing of friends and family--her husband, brother-in-law and five children, who are busy with their own successful careers--she could not have accomplished so much.

While the pandemic has eased, many needs are still there. Thus, Angels for Action has resumed the many services that were provided prior to March 2020 and is continuing to help those born of the anguish that the pandemic brought.

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

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