

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY VILLANUEVA

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

and

LATINO NEW JERSEY HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

YAZMIN GOMEZ

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Yazmin Gomez: Hello.

Anthony Villanueva: Hi there.

YG: Can you hear me all right?

AV: I'm going to turn the volume up on mine, I can hardly hear you.

YG: Can you hear me now?

AV: Yes, I can hear you.

YG: Good, I can hear you too. Let's just get started. I will just read the preamble to the interview. Hello, today is Tuesday, July 7, 2020. My name is Yazmin Gomez. I will be interviewing Anthony Villanueva for the Rutgers Latino New Jersey History Project. Please know, Mr. Villanueva, that this interview, audio/video file, and transcript will be placed in the Rutgers Oral History Archives. If there is anything you do not wish to answer or discuss, I will honor your wishes. Also, if there is something you would like to discuss, please make sure to bring it up, and we will talk about it. Since we are not conducting this interview in person, I need to record your verbal consent. I need you to respond to these three questions. Please say, "Yes, I agree," or "No, I do not agree," after each one. One, do you give consent to archive your interview and your materials at the Rutgers Oral History Archives?

AV: Yes, I agree.

YG: Do you grant copyright over to the interview and any materials you provide?

AV: Yes, I agree.

YG: Do you agree to allow us to post this interview on the Internet, where it may be viewed by people around the world?

AV: Yes, I agree.

YG: All right. Then, let's just get started. Just starting off, when and where were you born?

AV: I was born January 1, 1945, in New York City.

YG: What neighborhood did you grow up in? What was it like growing up there?

AV: The neighborhood was El Barrio. El Barrio is 110th Street. The center of El Barrio Puertorriqueño in Manhattan was 110th Street and Madison Avenue. I grew up on 110th Street and Madison Avenue, right in the middle of where everything was going on. [Editor's Note: East Harlem, also known as Spanish Harlem or El Barrio, is a neighborhood in Upper Manhattan, New York City.]

YG: What was that community like? Is there anything especially memorable about it?

AV: Well, the community, at that time, I thought that's the way the world was. Everybody was Puerto Rican. Everybody spoke Spanish. We interacted with everybody in the neighborhood. I only spoke Spanish at the time. I didn't know how to speak English. I didn't learn how to speak English until I was about six or seven years old. Yes, carefree, no problems, run all over the place, playing. I was fortunate enough to live one block over from Central Park. So, I would walk over to Central Park a lot and play over there. It was a nice place to live.

YG: What are your parents' names?

AV: My mother's name was Angela Melendez. Her maiden name was Melendez. She was born in Puerto Rico in 1923.

YG: And your father?

AV: His name was Gil Villanueva. He was born in Isabela, Puerto Rico, and he was born in 1902.

YG: Do you know how your parents met in Puerto Rico?

AV: They never met in Puerto Rico. They met here. My father used to work in a tomato factory in downtown Manhattan, and my mother worked there. They met there, they started dating, and they wound up getting married. They were married in 1944.

YG: Do you know anything about your parents' migration story to New York?

AV: My father came to New York in the late '30s. He came several times by ship and he went back and forth, but around 1937, he stayed in New York. He was married. He had a first wife, and he came with his wife and his two sons, my two older brothers. Then, he divorced his first wife around 1941-1942, and then he met my mother in 1944. My father was associated with the nationalist independence cause of Albizu Campos. When he was at *la isla* [the island], in Puerto Rico, he was followed by the insular police or the FBI. He just said he was followed and stopped a lot by police. So, he thought it would be better just to come to the mainland and start new here in the mainland. [Editor's Note: Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos (1891-1965) was an attorney and politician who led the Puerto Rican independence movement.]

YG: Did you ever visit Puerto Rico in your childhood?

AV: Oh, yes, yes. I went back and forth. Ever since I was three or four years old, my mother would go back and forth a lot, but when I got older, when I was about thirteen, I went and spent the summers with my uncles. Every year or every other year, I would go to Puerto Rico. Even as an adult, I would go to Puerto Rico. I loved it so much that around

1980-1985, I bought property, I bought a house, in Carolina, Puerto Rico. My wife and I used to go back and forth to Puerto Rico.

YG: You mentioned your father's political affiliation. Was your mother's the same, and did that impact you in any way?

AV: No, my mother was apolitical. She was much younger than my father. There was a twenty-year difference between my mother and my father. She was apolitical up until the day she died. She didn't participate in political discussions, debates, nothing.

YG: Okay. Did you grow up in a religious household?

AV: Well, we were Catholic. I was baptized, and I attended a Catholic grammar school growing up. I think myself and my brother and my sister and my other brother were more religious than our parents. My parents didn't go to church, but they said they were Catholic, whereas my brother and I and my sister and brother, we would go to church. We participated in the church events.

YG: You mentioned that you learned English later in your childhood.

AV: Yes.

YG: Was that when you attended grammar school?

AV: Yes, it was about the time that the television came out. I would sit in front of the television, and I picked up a lot of the English language. When I started grammar school, I learned it real quick. I'm bilingual; I can speak both, read both, write both.

YG: In school, what were your favorite subjects?

AV: I didn't have any favorite subjects in grammar school. In high school, my favorite subject was sciences, biology, zoology, anything having to do with the human body, anatomy, physiology.

YG: Did your family stress education?

AV: No. My mother and father were divorced when I was four. So, I had like a bifurcated life. I mean, I would spend part of my time with my father and the other time with my mother. Both of them worked, so education was up to me. I mean, I learned very early, I think I was around twelve or thirteen, when I started going to high school. I was going to go to high school. Growing up in Jersey City, because we moved from El Barrio to Jersey City, right across the river, that was the first time I was exposed to discrimination and prejudice. I realized at a very early age that the only way that I was going to surpass or surmount discrimination and prejudice was through being educated and getting a better education. So, I strived to excel in my studies in high school, college, everything.

YG: What prompted your move to Jersey City?

AV: The neighborhood in El Barrio, in New York, the kids my age, ten, twelve, eleven, were getting into gangs. My mother was concerned, since I was the oldest and I was always out, that I would get involved in gangs. Besides, by that time, I had a stepfather. My stepfather had a job in Jersey City, and he used to commute to Jersey City from Manhattan. Then, this one summer, we just packed up, and there I was in Jersey City.

YG: What were those experiences of discrimination like for you when you were experiencing them in Jersey City for the first time?

AV: Well, the first time I was exposed to it, I was getting on a bus to go to the YMCA uptown. I got on line, and the bus pulled up. I started to get on the bus. I put my right foot on the step to get up, and the bus driver, with his hand, he motioned for me to step back. He said, "Step back and step to the side." I didn't know, you know, "Did I do something wrong?" I was about eleven, twelve, and I didn't know if I'd something wrong, "Was I in the special line?" I didn't know. So, all these white people got on the bus, and then he said to me, "Okay, you can come on now." So, I got on the bus, I put my coin in the little box, and he said to me, "Go in the back of the bus." I was like, "What the hell's going on here?" I didn't know. That's when I started to put two and two together that since I was a little darker than everybody else on the bus, there had to be some reason for this.

Add to that--when we moved to Jersey City, there were very few Puerto Ricans, there were very few Hispanic families living in Jersey City. It was predominantly Irish and Polish where we lived. After that, when I used to go to the movies on Saturdays, it was like a quarter, and you go in. The lady said to me, "You have to go upstairs. You can't sit downstairs." "Well, you know, my quarter is just as good as this guy's quarter." "No, all you foreigners have to go sit upstairs." So, that's when that little light went off in my head and said, "Hey, wait a minute. I've got to be better than these guys. I've got to excel." That's when the little light went off in my head, and I said, "Well, if I do good in school, I can advance, I can better myself. I can handle these situations better."

Through life, there's been [discrimination]. For example, when I was in the Navy, and I was reporting to a base in North Carolina. A bunch of us, all Puerto Ricans, stopped in this twenty-four-hour diner. I sat down; I ordered a hamburger. The lady told me, "We're out of hamburgers." Then, I ordered a sandwich. She said, "We're out of sandwich meats," and it was just they just didn't want to serve us.

When I reported to boot camp in the Navy, the drill instructor, the first thing he did was he called me Chico. "Chico, step up," and I didn't move. "Chico, come on, Chico, front and center," and I didn't move and he got in my face. I told him, "My name isn't Chico." So, I had to clean the latrines for a couple of days and all that stuff, but it was pretty common then.

YG: Continuing with your educational journey, what made you decide to attend college?

AV: Well, high school wasn't just going to cut it. [laughter] Everybody went to high school back then, and they still worked in a factory. My aspirations were to be a doctor. I

wanted to be a doctor. I loved biology and I loved chemistry and I loved all those sciences. I was pretty good at it, and that was my goal, to be a doctor. You can't get to medical school if you don't get an undergraduate degree. That was my ambition.

YG: What university did you attend? Could you briefly just describe your collegiate experience?

AV: I went to Rutgers University in Newark, and I commuted from Jersey City to Newark. It was just a half an hour, twenty-five-minute drive, and I was there. It was pretty benign. It was go to classes, go to a ratskeller, go over here, go over there and do your thing, but I was able to do some memorable things. Some memorable things about college was that I used to go to--I don't know how it is now--but across the main street from all the college buildings, there was the Rutgers Law School and there was a library there. It was very quiet, and I used to go in there to study. There was this professor that had her office by where I used to sit, and every now and then, she'd say, "Oh, here you are again," and, "How are you doing?" It was a very casual, blasé type of conversation. I later find out, I found out like maybe a couple of years ago, that that was Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who had her office [there]. She taught at Rutgers Law. I used to talk to her like I was talking to a librarian. [Editor's Note: Ratskeller, or rathskeller, is a German term for a bar or restaurant that is located in a basement or below ground. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who taught at Rutgers Law School from 1963 to 1972, served on the U.S. Supreme Court from 1993 until her death in 2020.]

The one thing that propelled me to leave college in '66 [was the Vietnam War]. I started in 1963. I dropped out in '66. Right around the corner from some of the classroom buildings, the Veterans Administration had big offices in the middle of town. There was constant demonstrations back then about the Vietnam War, people demonstrating against the war. It was difficult for the students to get through all this to get to class on time. It came out in the news that the draft was going to start. They were going to start accelerating the draft and stuff. So, I just dropped out. I went and I enlisted and got that over with, got my military obligation taken care of, and just got out of there. Then, when I came back from Vietnam in 1971, by that time I was married, I had a child, and I went back to school, finished my undergraduate. I was a police officer, at the time, in Jersey City. So, I was able to work at night and go to school during the day and finish my degree. I finished my degree in the middle of 1972, but they didn't confer the degree until 1973. So, that was that.

YG: During your time at Rutgers, what did you major in, and why did you end up picking that?

AV: I majored in biology and history, biology because I wanted to go to medical school, history because it always interested the hell out of me, things that happened and how they happened and why they happened and people's opinions about certain situations. That was my double major.

YG: While you were at Rutgers-Newark, were there a lot of Latino people? What was the Latino population?

AV: Oh, no. [laughter] No, no, there wasn't. There were some, but it was the same breakdown as it was in high school. I mean, I think that I was way ahead of my time, because I don't remember meeting or being in class with any Hispanics. There might have been one or two Mexican young ladies in one of my classes, but there was minimal, very little Hispanics. I mean, I pledged a fraternity, Tau Kappa Epsilon, and I was the only Hispanic. I mean, there weren't even any Blacks in the fraternity. The number of minorities, Blacks was minimal. It was white. When I returned, back in the '70s, it was different. There was a lot of minorities, Hispanics from all over Central and South America, a lot of Blacks. There was a lot of Black organizations demonstrating and carrying on their goals.

YG: You mentioned that you dropped out midway through your undergraduate to join the military, specifically the Navy. Of all the branches, what motivated you to join the Navy?

AV: Well, I didn't like the Army. I just hated the Army. I had an older brother that died in Korea. So, I went and I volunteered for the Marine Corps, but the Marines--I had a metal pin in my shoulder from recurrent dislocations when I was playing football. They said that they wouldn't take me with a pin in my shoulder. Then, I went over to the Navy, and I enlisted in the Navy and I told them that I wanted to be a corpsman. A corpsman is in the medical department. It's like a medic in the Army. In the Navy, they call them a corpsman. So, they were very glad to get me into that that field. I thought I was going to work in a hospital. Little did I know that four or five months after I finished my training, I would be sent to Vietnam, and that's where I wound up.

YG: How did your family feel about you deciding to join the military?

AV: They were all devastated. I had an older brother who died in Korea. I had another brother that was older than me that was in World War II. I had three, four uncles that were in the Army during the Second World War and Korea. My family was very military-oriented, but my mother was all verklempt, thinking that I was going to die in Vietnam too. It didn't matter; I wanted to go.

YG: You mentioned that you initially thought you would be in a hospital. What was it like once you did arrive in Vietnam?

AV: Well, I went to medical training in Great Lakes--that was like a sixteen-week course--and then, from Great Lakes, they sent me to Camp Lejeune, which is a Marine base in North Carolina. Then, we had eight weeks of Marine training, because we were going to be embedded with Marine platoons. We would be with the Marines in Vietnam. After I finished that training, they sent me to a hospital--like they said they were--they sent me to a hospital, St. Albans Naval Hospital, in Queens, New York. There, I spent four months working in the surgical wards, and then, after that period, I was off to Vietnam. [Editor's Note: Naval Station Great Lakes is a training base for the Navy in Illinois.]

YG: What unit were you a part of, and what was your rank within that during your time in Vietnam?

AV: First of all, I was assigned to a mobile construction battalion in Vietnam. The base was in Đông Hà, Đông Hà Combat Base. It was in Quang Tri Province in northern Vietnam. We were three or four miles just south of the demilitarized zone, the DMZ. On that base, there was Navy personnel, and there were Marine personnel. On any given day, the Marines needed extra corpsmen, because the corpsmen were getting killed left and right during that time. So, I would go out with the Marines on patrols. I would go out several times a week. Basically, when I wasn't out on patrol, I worked in a dispensary administering sick call. By that time, I was what's considered an E-3, which an E-3 is like a PFC [private first class] or a private in the Army. I was promoted to E-5, which is like a sergeant, before I left Vietnam a year, thirteen months later. [It was] thirteen months because I volunteered to stay extra.

YG: Why did you volunteer to stay longer?

AV: This may sound a little crazy, but I didn't care. Something happened to me in terms of worrying about being killed or dying. After a while, you just don't care whether you're going live or die, and what the hell, you're young, crazy. It was like going out for a walk in the jungle and coming back. It didn't bother me.

YG: After your service, did you receive any honors or commendations?

AV: I received one commendation for heroism during a combat situation, and that was it. I thought there was one situation where--here's a perfect example of discrimination. There was an incident along the perimeter of our base, where some incoming rounds came and killed several Marines and wounded several Marines. I was the corpsman on duty, so I responded to that situation. What happened was there were three Marines in a bunker, and a round came in into the bunker and blew them up. So, two guys were blown to pieces within the bunker, but one guy was blown out of the bunker and he had a wound to his head. So, I was the first one there. I started to treat him. I knew that the other guys were dead, because I looked in the bunker and there were pieces all over the place. So, I started treating this injured Marine, and then another corpsman showed up. The other corpsman was white. He stuck his head in the bunker, and he says, "Everybody's dead, everybody's dead." Then, a couple of officers showed up. Now, during the time I was treating the wounded individual, I put my body between his and the incoming rounds. I took my flak jacket off--which is like a bulletproof vest--and I put it over his head because he had a head wound. I didn't want him to get hit in the head again. I called for a helicopter to come pick him up, take him away. I started an IV. A couple of weeks later, the other guy, the white guy, gets the Silver Star. He gets the Silver Star. He gets awarded a Silver Star for heroism in combat, and he didn't do anything. I'm the one that did all the work, and that was blatant. That was a blatant. [Editor's Note: The Silver Star is the third-highest military combat decoration that can be awarded to a member of the United States Armed Forces for courageous behavior in action.]

YG: How did you feel about being passed over on that? Did you think that was something common at the time in the military?

AV: Yes, yes, yes. A lot of Hispanic individuals, whether they were in the medical corps or out in the field in the infantry, they were looked over, passed over, disregarded often.

YG: Would you say that the military was diverse at the time? What was the environment like? You have mentioned your experiences with discrimination during your time in the military.

AV: Well, in Vietnam, I would say it was about forty percent white, thirty percent Black, and the rest was all mixed. There was a lot of Mexicans, Hispanic. There were Indians, Native [Americans]. There was a lot of what I call white trash from the South. They were blatant in their discrimination, right in your face type of discrimination. But when the bullets start flying, everybody's the same color.

YG: When did you return from Vietnam? What was your experience like returning to the United States?

AV: Well, I returned in the early '70s, 1970s, and I remember getting off of the plane in LaGuardia Airport in New York and I remember not being able to get a taxi, because the taxi would just pass you up. If you were in uniform, they would just pass you up, but finally I got home.

YG: How would you say you were treated after returning?

AV: It was like I was invisible. People didn't know how to act around me, and it wasn't just my experience. A lot of the veterans that I spoke to at the time felt the same way. They felt like you're here, but you're not here. People were tippy-toeing around you. Once they knew you returned from Vietnam, they wouldn't look you straight in the eye. They would like look off to the side if they had to talk to you about anything.

YG: Why do you think that was?

AV: Pardon me?

YG: Why do you think that was?

AV: I think that they had a certain opinion, a certain image that they watched on television, during the newsreels, about situations in Vietnam. They were either curious and were afraid to ask or had made up their mind that all Vietnam veterans were killers, killed kids, shot women and stuff. The only people that I didn't feel uncomfortable around were other veterans.

YG: When you returned, did you sort of form a network of veterans that you kept in touch with?

AV: Yes, even to this day, there are some guys that we still keep in touch. We've had reunions, a couple of reunions, but the numbers are dwindling. A lot of the guys have died.

Over the last fifty years, there's been a network of about--first, there was about twenty guys. Now, it's down to about four or five, but we always stay in touch.

YG: How do you think that network affected your transition back into civilian life?

AV: That was very beneficial, but I also think that it isolated me from properly assimilating back into civilian life. See, back in the early '70s, PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], they didn't know what [it was]. Nobody called it PTSD. They just called it battle fatigue. Keep in mind that during the '70s, I was a police officer, so by extension, it was my Vietnam. It was the same adrenaline, the same jumping in and out of cars, arresting people, getting involved in situations. So, it kept the adrenaline going, but I didn't know that I was suffering from severe PTSD. It wasn't until late in the '70s that I went to the Veterans Administration and was tested, and it was determined that I had very bad PTSD.

YG: How did you react to that diagnosis, knowing that you had this trauma?

AV: At first, I said to myself, "I feel the same," and that was my first mistake, thinking, "Hey, I'm okay." I'm not okay, wasn't okay. It wasn't until I learned more about the illness and how to recognize triggers, things that set me off. I understood why I liked to be alone, don't want to be around people. I mean, I was in therapy for a good six or seven years--at various times for a total of about six or seven years--until I really understand all the ramifications of PTSD and how it affected me and how the therapy helped.

YG: After your service, you mentioned you returned back to school. What was your motivation for finishing up your degree?

AV: I wanted to get a bachelor's degree. I wanted to finish what I started. I wasn't just going to let it go by the wayside. I needed that bachelor's degree. I had an opportunity to go to medical school, but I had a wife and I had a young daughter. I had just put them through three years of not being around, being in Vietnam, being in the military, and I couldn't see putting them through that sort of sacrifice at such a young age. Plus, the fact that back in the early '70s, being a police officer was one of the highest paying jobs. I mean, making twenty thousand dollars a year back in 1971 was good money.

YG: When you did return to school, you were a father and a working police officer.

AV: Yes.

YG: How did things like that, plus your military service, change your view of perhaps education or the institution you were at? How were things different when you returned back to school?

AV: When I returned back to school, I considered myself a little bit more mature than the students that were there, because I was. [laughter] I was. A lot of the people who were still demonstrating against the war, we had polar opposite views on the war and politics and everything else. So, I became a little bit more vocal and yet stayed in my zone, because I worked a regular eight-hour job in the police department. I went to school. I used to get up

at two o'clock in the morning to do my homework and stuff, because it was the only time that it was quiet. Then, I'd go to work, come home, sleep for a couple hours and go to school. I took classes late in the afternoons. I got all my classes in, and so it was a grind.

YG: How did you feel once you ultimately decided not to go to medical school and not pursue this dream of being a doctor?

AV: Disappointed. Disappointed in myself, then angry, because I realized that a lot of guys my age that should've enlisted, could've enlisted, should've been drafted, didn't. They figured out some excuse to get out. The guys from my fraternity all went on to medical school and law school and big jobs, while I interrupted my education to go fulfill my military obligation. Then, they had the nerve to turn around and look down at you, "Well, I'm a doctor. I'm a lawyer." So, I was disappointed, but I still felt that I did the right thing.

YG: As a police officer, what was Jersey City like at that time to be a member of law enforcement?

AV: It was a bad time. It was a very bad time. I don't know if you're familiar with the Black Panther movement. The Black Panther movement was just getting started, so they were very militant. The Young Lords was the Puerto Rican militant group, and they were active. So, there was a lot of gang activity, and there was a lot of interaction with police, plus the regular crimes of breaking and entering and muggings and shootings and murders and robberies. So, that was an everyday occurrence. To me, it wasn't that unusual because, in my mind, that was an extension of my Vietnam, being in combat.

YG: What were your thoughts on these militant youth groups like the Black Panthers and Young Lords?

AV: They didn't know what they were talking about. They just didn't know what they were talking about. Think about it, you sit in your living room, and you pass judgment on situations that are occurring thousands and thousands of miles away and condemning soldiers, sailors, Marines as to what they're doing or what they're not doing, and directing their anger at those individuals when if you don't like what's going on, I mean, you go and you vote and you go through the political process and try and change things that way, not by violence and interrupting other people's lives and causing all kinds of mayhem. In 1971, '71 or '72, I forget the year, there were riots in Newark and the school was shut down and classes were cancelled because the campus had been taken over by some organizations. I think it was a combination of the Young Lords and the Black Panthers. They took over the campus in Newark. That was okay because what happened was whatever your grade was when they closed the school, that was your grade. That was the only time that I was on a dean's list, because I was doing well in all my classes.

YG: How long did you work as a police officer?

AV: Eighteen years.

YG: Then, in addition to your time as law enforcement, were there any other careers you had?

AV: Oh, yes. After law enforcement, I went to work in a huge conglomerate finance company on Wall Street, and I started out as a clerk. I started out as a clerk, and three years later, I was general manager and vice president of a corporation that employed over four hundred people, just in New York, and had satellite offices throughout the country. So, I was like third or fourth in command in that company. I did very well, did very, very well for myself.

YG: What prompted this drastic change in careers, from being on the street as law enforcement to working in a financial company?

AV: It was time for me to leave the police department. My PTSD, I understood it better, and it was really interfering with my life. So, I needed a change. I went to work there as a clerk. I was taking a paralegal course at night at some college in Manhattan. After about eight weeks into the semester, the president of the company comes into this big room, where all the clerks worked, and he said, "Does anybody know anything about New York City civil litigation?" I raised my hand. I raised my hand because we had just finished the section on New York City civil litigation. So, he said, "Come with me." So, he takes me into this office that goes into another office, and he says, "Tell me what these are." They were summons and complaints for what they call work labor and services or goods sold and delivered. There was two different types of ways you could sue people in New York State, and I explained it to him. He says, "You're right. Okay, you're now in charge of the legal department." So, I said, "What?" Now, the guy that he had just fired was smart enough to keep everything very proprietary. So, there was nothing for me to follow in his footsteps.

I had to take the New York civil litigation manual, which is about three inches thick, and I had to go step by step and develop my own procedures and my own way of handling these things. A year later, I had like twenty-five, twenty-six people working in the legal department. Some of the lawyers that worked in the legal department would report to me, and I just kept getting pay raises. In 1990, my Christmas bonus was a 300E Mercedes-Benz. That was my bonus. I was doing very well. Then, he messed up the whole gig. He got indicted. The president of the company got indicted for securities fraud, and the company closed down.

After that, I went to work in Hudson County, in government, as [an] economic development officer and did that for a few years. Then after that, I went to work for several banks. For a total of about fifteen years, I worked in several banks as the head of the SBA [Small Business Administration] lending department. I was the regional lender for New Jersey, for the SBA, in the several banks, and by that time, it was time to retire.

My grandkids lived out here in Illinois. We were living in New Jersey, my wife and I, my second wife. We were living in New Jersey. She was visiting the grandkids all the time, so we decided, "Look, I'm going to retire. Let's go buy a house." We bought a house here in Elgin, but sitting around and watching the grass grow just didn't make it for me. So, I went

to Elgin Community College, and I became a surgical tech, worked in the operating rooms. I did that for about a year, two years.

Then, one of my professors there, the head of the biology department, got sick. He used to teach cadaver dissection in the summers, but he got sick just before the summer started. He was going to be out, so he asked me to take over the class for him and I've been teaching cadaver dissection for the last eight years. That's it, until I decided that I wanted to pursue the history of the Caribbean, the history of Puerto Rico, because I noticed that the present generation of Puerto Ricans don't know anything about Puerto Rican history. They know absolutely nothing, and as each generation continues, they're going to know less and less and less and less. So, here I am.

YG: I am just trying to think of how to phrase this.

AV: Shoot.

YG: You are currently in a graduate program.

AV: Yes.

YG: How would you compare your current experiences in a graduate program to your undergraduate education?

AV: It's like night and day, it really is. I have an advisor who is very good, number one, and very understanding. I have professors that take a personal interest, not only in me but in other students too. It's more of a one-on-one type thing, whereas in the undergraduate world, you were just a number. "Just drop it off there, and I'll see you." I felt that that was very impersonal. My undergraduate life was very impersonal, but I also think, in fairness, it had to do with the type of college that I was attending. Newark, for me, it was a commuting college, whereas in graduate school, the classes are smaller, there's better interaction with the professors, and you don't have to deal with--I mean, well, sometimes you do. You know, Yazmin? It's Yazmin, *verdad*, your first name?

YG: Yes.

AV: Every class, there's always somebody that knows everything. "He's a know it all," every class has one. I noticed that in graduate school that's minimal, because everybody's good. They know what they're doing, and they know what they're there for. I just thought that undergraduate school, a certain percentage of students [were know-it-alls], especially after coming back and having [an] experience in Vietnam and experiencing life and death situations and being in a police department and interacting with people at their worst. As a police officer, you deal with people who are having problems. They're at their worst. That was the way it was then. Now, it's different, in terms of managing your studying, interacting with people, working on projects, that type of thing.

YG: For you, what was the process like applying to graduate school after finishing your undergraduate so many years ago?

AV: Well, of course I was very tentative about it. I felt that my age would be a hinderance. "What's this guy going to do with a master's or a Ph.D. at seventy-five?" But I found that the way my interviews went and my interaction with the counselors and advisors and professors, that my age wasn't a big hinderance, wasn't a big obstacle.

YG: You are pursuing a master's or a Ph.D.?

AV: No. I'm going to get my master's. I only have nine credits to go for my master's, but I hope to continue on to a Ph.D.

YG: In the classroom, have you felt that your age has been a hinderance?

AV: Well, in the beginning ... [Editor's Note: Mr. Villanueva's telephone rings.] Hold on, it's my wife. Okay, sorry, where were we?

YG: I just asked about how you felt in the classroom being older.

AV: Well, initially--and I see this all the time--initially, the first day or the first couple of sessions, some of the students look--even in grad school--they look at you like, "What's this old man doing here?" I hold my own. I do very well. I've been getting "A's" in everything, and I think I do very, very well. After a while, they realize that I'm just not taking up space.

YG: How did you overcome those anxieties you had when entering the classroom?

AV: I'm one of those individuals that's like in your face. If you push me, I'll push you back. I don't care. Think what you want. I know what I'm here for. I know what I want to do. I'm going to do it. For example, the first semester I went to register at NIU [Northern Illinois University], I went up to the finance office, and they couldn't find my records. When they finally found it, the guy behind the counter said, "Oh, you're one of those guys that's just taking up a number." [laughter] I looked at him, and I said, "You know, it's a good thing that you're really far away from me, because if I'd grabbed you, I'd pull you over and teach you a lesson." I was just taking up somebody else's space was what he was saying, and he changed his tune.

YG: Just a couple of questions about your family.

AV: Sure.

YG: You mentioned you were married. How did you meet your wife?

AV: The first one? The first one, I met her down the Shore. I was going down to the Jersey Shore, and she was staying at the same place I was staying. We started talking, started dating, wound up getting married, having three kids.

YG: What did she do for a living?

AV: She was a nurse. Then she became a stay-at-home mom. After we divorced, she went back to nursing.

YG: Did you meet before or after your service?

AV: Before.

YG: You mentioned that you have three kids. What do they do?

AV: My oldest, Nina, is fifty-one. She works in a hospital as a social worker. She has a college degree, Rutgers also, Rutgers-New Brunswick, and is doing very well. My son, Jeffrey, is forty-three. He's a graduate of the Naval Academy, and he was a Navy pilot for fourteen years. He retired from the Navy, and now he works in the federal government. My youngest, Nicole, Nicole's forty-one. She's also a college graduate, and she has a job with UnitedHealth. She handles the south section of Florida for UnitedHealth. She is a runner, marathons, half marathons, triathlon. She's preparing herself for the Ironman next year, Ironman competition.

YG: You mentioned they are all college graduates. Was that something you stressed to them growing up?

AV: Yes, yes.

YG: Your son was in the Navy. How did you feel when he told you that he wanted to join the military like you did?

AV: I was very happy. I was glad. I'll tell you a quick story about my son and how the discrimination all played in together. When I was in grammar school, I went to St. Peter's Grammar School. Across the street from St. Peter's Grammar School, was St. Peter's Prep. St. Peter's Prep was one of the best preparatory schools in the State of New Jersey. I think it still is. At that time, you didn't take a test, you were picked--the nuns picked the top three individuals in the class to go. It was all boys; there were no girls. So, I was like second in the class grade wise, and I figured, "I'm a shoe-in." Anyway, I wasn't picked. Somebody else that was like seventh in the class got picked. So, I didn't go to the prep [school].

I went to a public school, and then when I was in my junior year, I wanted to go to the Naval Academy. So, you had to take a test and you had to go see a Congressman and you had to go through all this political stuff, but then I didn't go. I wasn't picked. I was told, back then, by a friend of mine that, "Little Puerto Rican boys just don't go to the Naval Academy." We're talking in the mid '60s, early '60s. I instilled in all my kids this need for higher education. My son went to the prep, and my son went to the Naval Academy, not because I steered them. He made his own decision. He decided that he wanted to do this, and I was very, very, very glad. So, you could say that I lived vicariously through my son on those two endeavors.

YG: Do you have any grandchildren?

AV: I have five, two in Florida and three here in Illinois.

YG: What was your wife's ethnicity?

AV: My first wife?

YG: Yes.

AV: She was Ukrainian.

YG: How has your retirement been? You seem to be very active.

AV: I stay active. I can't just sit around. I'm constantly reading, researching, doing stuff. When I got called for this oral history thing, we were told, "We don't have any money to pay you." I said, "That's fine." I've got to keep busy, got to keep the brain going.

YG: In your current graduate program, or just at your current institution, do you feel that compared to when you were an undergrad that it is more diverse, or that it is just a different atmosphere? How would you compare them?

AV: It's a completely different atmosphere. For me, it's more conducive to learning. The certain amount of independence in what you do, what you research, how you handle your work, how your work is reviewed, how your work is graded is, to me, it's much better. I mean, I was in a history class with ninety students in one class. In a biology class, there's two hundred in the biology class. I don't know if that's the way it is now in undergrad, but my smallest class in graduate school was four students, five with myself. The biggest one was ten with myself. Plus, I'm studying and I'm researching in a field that I'm very interested in.

YG: Since you are now located in the Midwest, how would you compare that to your upbringing in the East Coast?

AV: This is like Sleepy Hollow. Nothing happens here, nothing. You don't hear sirens. I mean, we hear sirens up on the highway, but where I live, nothing happens. It's too slow.

YG: Is that something you like?

AV: [laughter] I've learned to get accustomed to it, but when you're used to the constant hustle and bustle and back and forth, I mean ... Have you ever been to New York to Manhattan?

YG: Yes.

AV: Traffic is boom, bam, horns, whistles, sirens, brakes, busses, people all over the place. Here, nothing.

YG: Okay, I have one quick question that I forget about earlier that I just wanted to circle back to. This is related to when you were discussing the Black Panthers and Young Lords. I was just wondering that since you did grow up in El Barrio and that's where the Young Lords were very influential, in El Barrio, did you know anyone, perhaps from your childhood or just in your circle, that were involved in the Young Lords, and how was that?

AV: Yes, yes, Felipe Luciano. Felipe Luciano is the guy who started the Young Lords in New York. There was Felipe Luciano, there's Pablo Guzmán, who became an ABC News commenter, and you had Geraldo Rivera, who everybody sees on TV. The other two guys I don't remember, but those are the guys that I remember. As a matter of fact, I sent an email to Felipe Luciano to see if I could get him to do the Covid oral history interview. He hasn't answered.

YG: Well, hopefully he responds. That would be an interesting story. I have just a couple more questions.

AV: Sure.

YG: What would you say you are most proud of?

AV: I would have to say my kids. I think that my kids, the structure, their morals that I instilled in them--along with their mother, I don't take all the credit--each one of them can independently stand on their own two feet and they can take care for their families now. They're passing on many of the moral standards that I instilled in them, and I'm very proud of them.

YG: In regards to your PTSD, how have you learned to sort of grapple with that, and what advice would you give to veterans that are currently going through similar situations?

AV: Well, first of all, you have to take stock of yourself within yourself. You have to look inside yourself. One of my therapists used to say, "Make believe you're in a helicopter looking down on you." You have to be honest with yourself and be willing to accept the fact that you have PTSD. You've got to deal with it. You can't be chopping off people's heads just because you feel like chopping off people's heads. I mean that figuratively. [laughter] You can't just be nasty and anti-social. You have to understand that you could be nasty and you could be anti-social because you have PTSD. So, you have to get beyond that. You have to get around it. We deal in a society that we interact with everybody around us. I mean, this Covid thing has made it a little difficult to interact, but we don't live in an isolated world. Many PTSD veterans feel that they live isolated, that they're isolated from everybody else around them, and they're not, you're not.

YG: What advice would you give to perhaps non-traditional students who are pursuing higher education at a later point in life?

AV: I would say, whatever it is you're pursuing, whatever reason you're going to school and you're trying to better yourself, don't let the person to your left or to your right that gives you that questionable look influence you. You know who you are. You know what

you're capable of. Besides, like I tell my kids, "Don't worry about that individual, because he doesn't pay your mortgage, so who gives a shit." I would tell them there's a book--I forgot who wrote it, but the book is called *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* [by Richard Carlson], which is a very candid look on how to get on with life even when you're having troubles. When I have one of my flashbacks or I get into a situation where I'm going to react not so nice, I say to myself, "Is this thing that's upsetting me going to upset me a year from now? Is it that serious that it's going to upset me a year from now?" If the answer's no, I say, "To hell with it."

YG: All right.

AV: My wife says to me, "What's your opinion on this?" or, "What's your opinion on that?" I'll say to her, "I have no opinion." When I have an opinion, sometimes it's dangerous; so I have no opinion.

YG: You have mentioned going to therapy. Did you feel there was any stigma in seeking help for your mental illness?

AV: No. Most Hispanic men in my generation, that was like a big no no. "What, you're going to therapy? Oh, my God. Well, don't tell anybody you're going." My mother [would say], "Don't tell anybody that you're going. They'll think you're crazy." Don't worry about that. Don't sweat the small shit.

YG: All right, that is the last of my questions. Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not covered or that you feel we need to cover?

AV: I think we covered quite a bit. I want to thank you for taking the time out to talk to me.

YG: No, thank you for taking the time to tell me your life story. So, the next steps would essentially be we transcribe all of this, and then, once it is finalized, we will send it to you and you will get the final say. If there is anything you would like removed, redacted, any of that, you would get final say, and then we will send it to the archives.

AV: Okay.

YG: All right.

AV: All right, you have a good day now, Yazmin.

YG: Yes, you too. Thank you.

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

Reviewed by Zach Batista 3/29/2020
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 4/21/2021
Reviewed by Anthony Villanueva 5/27/2021