

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project: “Bridgeport Working: Voices from the Twentieth Century”
Sara Torres (ST) interviewed by Mary Witkowski (I), January 13, 1998.

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I Sara, can you tell me when and where you were born?

ST I was born in New York City.

I In what year were you born?

ST 1935.

I What were your parents doing in New York City? What area of New York City?

ST I was born in Manhattan. They came from Puerto Rico -- I believe it was 1921, that they came to New York.

I Oh.

ST My father, who is Fernando [unclear] and my mom, Carmen, came at that time. In fact, she was just pregnant -- I think it was about three months -- with my brother, my oldest brother.

I How many children in the family?

ST Just three: two boys, and I'm the only girl.

I What did your father do when he first came there?

ST Oh, he did everything, he told me, in order to survive in New York. In order to be able to support a family. He did from taxi driver to cleaning windows, to selling, to anything he could at that time.

I Wow.

ST Because, as I understand, there was depression there.

I Yes, that would have been in the Depression -- yes.

ST Yes. So he did just about everything. He was a worker.

I Did your mother also work?

ST My mother was a secretary -- yes.

I In Manhattan?

ST In New York -- yes, yes.

I Wonderful. So, did you go to school in New York?

ST No, no. I was born there. And I believe I was only three or two-and-a-half when I came to Connecticut.

I Oh, okay.

ST So, my whole life was in Connecticut.

I And, did your parents come right to Bridgeport?

ST No, they came to Stamford first, because that's where my uncle was living. I believe we lived a year or a year-and-a-half or two years in Stamford, and then we moved to Bridgeport.

I Do you know what area of Puerto Rico that your parents are from?

ST Oh, yes. My father is from Ponci. In fact, at the University of Ponci, there's a street named [unclear].

I Oh, wow!

ST Yes. My father's parents are -- [unclear] is a famous composer. Music and piano.

I Oh, my.

ST And the [unclear] name goes all the way to Spain. In [unclear], we have some distant, distant relatives that are bullfighters.

I Oh, wow!

ST Yes. And my mother is from [unclear], Puerto Rico, which is right next to

San Juan.

I Okay. So they must have met over in Puerto Rico.

ST Oh, yes, yes. Yes, they did.

I Do you know what made them leave to come to the United States?

ST My father. My father wanted to -- well, my father always taught us to look ahead -- to have a goal, to not just be satisfied with something. My mom is the rock of the family, with her faith. And, yes, they came just like that -- to come up, and to be able to do better for their lives, and give better for their children at that time.

I That's wonderful.

ST Yes.

I So, they ended up in Stamford, Connecticut, which is kind of funny.

ST Yes.

I He must have worked there for a while. Do you remember Stamford at all?

ST No, I don't. Like I said, I was two-and-a-half or three years old. I know when we came from Bridgeport, he worked for Heinz Manufacturing, and that's in Fairfield.

I Oh, okay.

ST He worked there, in the factory, for a while. But then again, his goal was always to get ahead. Opportunities are there, --to look ahead.

I Right.

ST And that's when he started. He wanted to do more than just work in a factory.

I He wanted to be his own boss?

ST No. It's funny because we don't have that same trade. We don't want to be

known as boss or anything. He felt he had to be proud of Puerto Rican. Puerto Rican since Day One -- that was it. Spanish heritage, the love for your people, to be proud, to know who you are, to lift up your head even though somebody says something. That was taught to us when we were small.

I That's wonderful.

ST His dream was to help and to do something. I guess the name is Spanish. And that's when he started. He opened up a variety store, selling all magazines from New York -- Spanish magazines, and so forth. [**Tape Off/On**]

I So he started a store in Bridgeport?

ST In Bridgeport.

I Where was the store located?

ST On State Street. We lived at 1182 State Street. Oh, I lived there, I would say, sixteen years we lived on State Street. So, he started a variety store, and from the variety store, he went into -- we had the first Spanish movie theater.

I Oh, wow.

ST Yes. We used to go to New York and get the films on train, and bring the films back -- my mother and I.

I Where was the theater?

ST The theater was on State Street, all the way down at the end of State Street, so it was past Colorado Avenue. This is way down.

I So, where the Roller...?

ST Past the Roller [roller skating rink, "the Mosque"]. The Roller is just past Clinton Avenue, isn't it?

I Right, yes.

ST It was about two or three blocks down. It was called the *Liberty Theater*.

I Oh, the Liberty Theater?

ST Yes, the Liberty Theater. We had all the Spanish movies.

I What year would that have been around?

ST Oh, it had to be in the 1940s, because I was born in 1935, so I would say I was ten years old.

I Oh, okay.

ST So, it would be 1942, because that's when I remember going down the aisle. My dad owned the theater. "Keep quiet." You know? [laughs]

I [laughs] Working in the theater?

ST Yes.

I So, where were you going to school at that time?

ST I went to grammar school at [unclear] School, and then I went to Maplewood, and graduated from Bassick [high school].

I So, is that your real first job, working in the theater?

ST That was no job. That was just --

I Well, it was a job. [laughs]

ST [laughs] It was knowing all the friends and letting them in and everything. It was nice. He had that, and then we went into -- with the variety store, everybody there -- then it got to be --

I And that was on State Street, too?

ST On State Street -- yes. Then it got to be -- the variety store wasn't just selling magazines and everything. People were coming in -- our people -- coming in and talking to my mother, asking her, "How do I get a job? I just got here."

My mother got into being a social promoter. A person --you come in and cry and she listened to you. I mean, she could listen to anything. She sympathized with you.

I Oh, that's wonderful.

ST I think that's where we all went into helping the community -- because of that. The warmness that she had. And then the knowledge of my father knowing what to do, where to take them. He used to take them to find jobs. How to go enroll in this. How to fill out a form. They used to bring it -- they couldn't read English.

I Was there any other place to be able to go at the time?

ST No, at the time, there was no Spanish Coalition -- no. They used to come in there all the time. And that's when -- it was funny. That's when everybody would just come in for anything, and that's how we started knowing the demand of our people, and we started being known from all over. We moved from State Street to Park Avenue -- the theater. And Park Avenue, we also had the variety store. And then we started with everybody. I mean, people from South America, the Cubans. And I was involved all the time.

I What was the name of the store?

ST It was La Universal. And then we started the driving school, which was Atlas Auto Driving School.

I Oh, okay.

ST So, we had the driving school for, I'd say, more than twenty years, --about that. So then we did just about everything. I mean, we even showed you how to drive.

I [laughs]

- ST** And we would have classes to help you to read --
- I** Signs, do you mean?
- ST** Because at that time, you couldn't go in there and speak Spanish to get your driving test. So we would show them how to read and the signs and everything.
- I** ...be able to fill out the forms and everything.
- ST** Forms, and how to pass the test -- the questions, and what to answer, and so forth. So we even had classrooms.
- I** Wow.
- ST** Yes. We had that for a while. And, of course, me being the only daughter -- with my parents, I was always involved. And that's why so many people in Connecticut know me, because I did just about everything they did.
- I** It's amazing.
- ST** Yes. And then, of course, Dad started to go into politics.
- I** What year would that have been around? Try to guess.
- ST** He became notary public, I would say -- that would be the first thing, the notary public. I would say I was still in Maplewood, so I would say in the late 1940s. And then from there, he became Justice of the Peace.
- I** Oh!
- ST** Yes. I'm sorry. Then we got the travel agency. So we used to say, "We will help you come in and find you a job. We'll give you a driver's license at the Atlas Driving School. My father will marry you. The travel agency will send you on a honeymoon, and we got you all a package deal -- one stop in all. [laughs]
- I** [laughs] Good idea.

ST Yes. It was really something.

I I don't know how he kept it all going.

ST Because they lived -- it wasn't ours. We were supposed to close at five. If you came at five-thirty and knocked on the door, and you needed to know about this form because you're getting a job tomorrow and you had to have that form, my mother would just open the door, and you'd come in. She even would teach -- he's a Captain now in the police force. She even taught this Spanish policeman on our street how to speak Spanish, too.

I Oh, my.

ST And they would come in at night and talk to my mom, and she would teach him how to speak Spanish. I mean, it was a variety. It was a one stop, and we did just about everything.

I So, you were very involved with the community.

ST Yes, with our people. Yes, yes. Definitely. And then when I started in, my dad was interpreter in court, and he was involved, and that meant me, more or less, in the office. And I got so many calls for immigration.

I From the travel agency?

ST Yes, affidavit of supports. So I became a notary public.

I Oh.

ST Our people -- now, I'm just saying Puerto Ricans when I say 'our people' -- or Cubans. They would come in. I brought so many Cubans from Cuba, with affidavit of support, --from Ecuador.

I Explain to me what an affidavit of support is.

ST Say, for instance, you have a job. Now you want to bring your brothers from Cuba. I would tell you exactly what papers you need. You would need your

letter, notarized from work. Your bank notarized. I would also get you the form. I'm a notary public -- we would fill it out. We'd send it to the counsel and request it. Of course, we'd have to verify everything, --that you're an American citizen, and so forth and so on. And you'd be surprised. When I started that, I did it as a favor to a friend of ours. It's a lot of paperwork. But when he came back, and he brought his wife and the kids, and they all came in and he said -- he told the kids -- "Give her a kiss. If it wasn't for her, you wouldn't be here." I didn't realize how much meaning my paperwork and my work meant to them.

I To really see it.

ST Yes. After that, I loved the job because it was more -- it's a blessing that I could do something and bring these families together. So I loved it. So, we did everything. Our office, travel agency, auto driving school -- whatever you wanted to call it -- everything.

I Was it all in the same building?

ST Yes.

I Oh, really?

ST Yes, it was nice.

I And where was that located?

ST Well, we were at State Street, we were at Park Avenue, and then we moved to East Main Street.

I Oh, okay.

ST So, we were on the West End and Park Avenue would be the South End, and then we went to the East Side.

I Okay.

ST So we covered just about all of it.

I Yes.

ST But people would come from New Haven, from Hartford, from Norwalk, from Stamford, just to do the papers with us, just to buy the tickets from us.

I It was probably the only one around that did that kind of work.

ST At that time, we were the only Spanish driving school, the only Spanish variety store, and we were the only Spanish travel agency.

I Now, did you notice a bigger influx of people during any particular time?

ST Well, you know, in the beginning it was just Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Maybe because our club that my father was -- but then, it just -- our office started going with South America, Mexicans. It was then Hispanic.

I Hispanic [unclear].

ST Then I can see where we all -- no matter what -- the language we all knew. Different expression, different words. But it all turned to be -- all of us together -- Hispanics.

I Now, what was the club that your dad was involved in?

ST My dad had Latin American Society. They were founders of it.

I Oh, is that what you were [unclear]?

ST Yes. That one started on State Street, way at the end of State Street. Do you know where the public library used to be?

I Yes.

ST Well, a block before they used to have a club there, and it was Latin American Society. My father and other Puerto Rican associates all started the club for family.

I So, it sounds like a lot of people settled in the west end of the city first, sort

of.

ST Well, yes. Just about, now that you mention it. Yes, you're right. Yes. Now that you mention it, yes. So, like I said, I've been in this area. My children were raised in the same area. I mean, they went to St. Mary's Catholic School on the East Side, and they've always been involved in everything and the same, so they knew them. Where they knew me, they knew my family. We just keep going.

I So, what was the religion that your family was involved with?

ST Well, you know, it's funny because we're Catholics. But yet, that didn't make [unclear]. I've gone to Pentecostal churches, Spanish -- because I love glorifying the Lord. And the way they do it -- "Hallelujah," and your hands are up.

I Right.

ST Fine. I used to go to the Salvation Army on -- I think it was Colorado Avenue, they had it when we lived on State Street. Because they catered to the children when I was small. I come out of St. Anthony's Church, I'd go around the block and go to the Salvation Army.

I Do both. [laughs]

ST And we would be singing and clapping at the Salvation Army.

I Yes.

ST My aunt, who lived in Stamford, was Protestant, and my uncle is a Nazerene. So, I mean, we have a mixture of all. And my grandmother was "hallelujah," which is more of a stricter than Pentecostal. So being involved in everything, there's only one Lord. It didn't matter.

I So, going back to when you were a kid, growing up in Bridgeport. This is

kind of important with kids today. What did you do for fun? Any activities that you remember, in particular?

ST Oh, I remember roller skating, playing hopscotch.

I Did you go to the roller skating dome, or whatever it was?

ST The dome across the street from State Street --

I Because you were in that area.

ST Yes. We lived on State Street. Yes. I remember my mother making me little roller skating outfits.

I [laughs]

ST Real short and everything. I mean, we couldn't afford it at that time. So she made it. You know, we didn't buy them. But they did buy my skates for Christmas. I remember that. And yes, I even took lessons over there, --that was roller skating. I played hopscotch. Bicycle riding. I didn't get a bicycle. I used to use my brother's because they were afraid that something could happen. We didn't have a gymnasium, like they have now for Bassick High School.

I Right.

ST So, ours was outside, in the yard, playing.

I Did you speak mostly Spanish at home?

ST I spoke Spanish at home and English at school.

I So, how did the school --?

ST I didn't have any girlfriends at [unclear] School. When I went to school there was no Spanish. I was about the only one. I remember that I would come out of school. We lived on the last floor -- the fourth floor, up high. My mother and I would ring the bell, and I told my mother to throw the

money out the window -- what we needed -- and she would say, "Buy bread and cheese for lunch," or something, and she would say it in Spanish to me, and I would answer, "Okay." And then if I wanted to say something that my girlfriend wouldn't know, I would say it in Spanish, you know? "[unclear]"

I [laughs]

ST My girlfriend would say, "What did you say? What did you say?" But thinking of it -- and I've thought of it many times -- here, I lived on 1182 State Street, and I had -- going to the school -- hardly no Spanish persons. At the club we met our other people.

I But it must have been harder in class. You know, nowadays, it's hard for kids -- English. They only speak Spanish at home.

ST Yes.

I And then they go to class, and it's so hard for some of the children.

ST Oh, yes, yes.

I How was that for you? Did you adjust pretty well? Do you remember?

ST Well, in my house, my father felt that we should know both languages fluently. So we would speak to him in English. Well, actually, I'm sorry. He demanded that we spoke in Spanish to him, and then we would speak in English to him. But we spoke fluent English and Spanish -- yes.

I Oh, that's great.

ST Yes. In fact, even in Bassick High School, my mother made me take French for two years. [laughs]

I [laughs]

ST It's a good thing my French teacher was Spanish.

I Parlez-vous Francais? [laughs]

ST Je parle Francais un petit. [laughs] But it's a good thing the French teacher was a Spanish person. She would always say, "Sara, you're saying it in Spanish. Say it in French."

I [laughs]

ST But she wanted me to get the most languages that I could.

I I grew up in Michigan and I had a Spanish teacher that was from Brooklyn, and she spoke Spanish with this Brooklyn accent. It was funny. [laughs]

ST Yes, you see?

I Different.

ST That's what happens. Yes.

I And then you expanded the travel agency. You got married in what year?

ST I got married in 1953, and it's funny. I went to Japan.

I Oh!

ST And in Japan, I was working for General Electric. I was a private secretary. Well, I shouldn't say private. I had three bosses, and in my first job I was nineteen -- almost twenty.

I When you got out of high school, that was your first job -- GE?

ST Oh, no. Not my first job. My father believed we should -- I volunteered. When I was twelve, I used to go to Hall Homes, it was called. Hall Homes Neighborhood House. I used to take care of children there. I always took care of children. I always did something. My father never just had me around the house, doing nothing. Then I worked for Levitz, part--time.

[Tape Off/On]

I So you worked at Levitz?

ST Yes. And then I worked in Texas, I worked for Larry Robinson's studio,

calling on the phone in Spanish. So, wherever I went, my Spanish was always the one thing that got me noticed or got me my job, or was the one thing that always came in as an asset.

I There was a need for it.

ST Now, here I was in Japan. I went to the military base to shop at the PX, and here I'm shopping, and I hear all these Spanish voices. It's like an argument. And then I go over to it, and here were three nuns, trying buy blankets and everything at the PX, at the cash register, and she's telling them that they can't buy because they have no military I.D. They can't take that stuff. And they're trying to pay for it, and they're speaking in Spanish. "[Unclear]."

I [laughs]

ST And I ran right up. "Oh, I can speak Spanish and English." I was an interpreter.

I Oh, wow.

ST I paid for it because I had my military [id]. It was the most blessingest thing because they were from an orphanage, and then after work, I would go and help them out. And on the weekends, volunteer for the orphanage.

I So, were you actually in the military at this time?

ST No.

I How did you [unclear] in Japan?

ST My first husband was in the Service.

I Oh, okay. I see.

ST Yes. And so I went over there.

I How interesting.

ST So, I lived in Japan almost four years.

I Oh, that's wonderful.

ST I worked for General Electric.

I Do you like the Japanese?

ST Well, working for the Sisters -- they were from Spain -- Lady of [Lourdes?].

I became very close to them. And, of course, remember, I'm Puerto Rican.

At that time, I had long, black, black hair. And I had a maid. Because in

Japan you only pay fifty dollars a month to have a maid.

I [laughs] Wow.

ST She would wash the car for me every morning, clean the house, do my hair, get the breakfast -- I'm telling you!

I Wow.

ST At that time, you've got to remember, okay? So, I looked oriental -- of course, my olive skin and everything.

I Oh, yes.

ST Yes. Oh, you'd be surprised. Over there, they thought I was a movie actress.

I cut my eyes, you know? But I was really Japanese, you know?

I [laughs]

ST And then, I'll never forget. It was a Thursday. I was at work and Mother Superior called me and she said, "Sara" -- in Spanish of course. "You have to come down right now. The Lord spoke to me and I need you to come immediately." I went down there and she gave me, in my arms -- literally just handed me a two-week old baby, which is my second daughter, Elaine.

I Oh, wow! Oh, wonderful.

ST Oh, yes. It was a blessing.

I Oh, my!

- ST** She said the Lord spoke to her. They gave her the baby last night and the Lord spoke to her that I should have the child.
- I** Oh, my!
- ST** But if she was to keep the child there, she would have to register the child. And, of course, captains and officers -- and they have a long list at the orphanage. And, so, I had to take the child. Let me tell you, till this day, there's only two -- well, there's a lot of miracles, but things that you dream. I went in and bought outfits and went home. "Oh, I got to buy a crib." I went back and bought a crib. "I've got to come back. Oh, how about the bottle. She's crying.
- I** Now, this was your second child?
- ST** Yes. I didn't have no children.
- I** Oh, no children.
- ST** This is Elaine at two weeks old, okay?
- I** Yes.
- ST** So, they gave me Elaine. And I'm telling you, I went to that PX. They were all laughing at me. The military, the guys at the [unclear]. "What else do you want? When are you coming back? In five minutes?" I cried. I laughed. It was a blessing from God because I learned that my first husband was -- at his -- age fifteen or sixteen, he had a ruptured appendix, and he wasn't able to -- he was sterile.
- I** Oh.
- ST** So, that's one of the reasons that my annulment was given -- because he never told me about it, you see?
- I** Oh, yes.

- ST** He figured that I wouldn't marry him if I did. But I didn't care at that time, you know? You're young and you're [unclear].
- I** She is beautiful.
- ST** Oh! After knowing that you're never going to have any children -- and all I did was take care of children since I was small. I love kids! Kids come to me anywhere.
- I** That was very brave of you to take on a child, though.
- ST** Oh! Let me tell you -- I was so flabbergasted. Then, of course, to make the story short, I went to court. I had Elaine almost a year, and I had to get her approved and everything, and they came in and they inspected everything. Three Japanese officers came in and they interviewed me. They didn't say a word. Long faces. Nothing. The interpreter and Mother Superior is there and I'm saying, "[unclear]." I'm saying, "I'm scared they're going to take my baby." I had her a year. I'll take a plane to the United States and take her with me. They're not taking this baby away from me. Not a smile -- not nothing. Three hours, talking. Then I couldn't talk anymore. I figured what else can I do? I went in my room and I brought an album. Since I got her -- Day One -- I must have taken about three thousand pictures, you know?
- I** [laughs]
- ST** I had the album already filled. I showed them the house that I already had a home, here in Bridgeport. They saw that -- that was it. They could see that I truly loved her.
- I** Yes, right.
- ST** And from there on, the smile cracked open. They had teeth, and they left and I knew Elaine was mine, you know?
- I** Oh, my. That's wonderful.

- ST** It was fabulous.
- I** So, when did you return to --?
- ST** Now I only had nine months left, and I went to court to change Elaine's name to my name. And when I was in court, I heard that she was a baby of two.
- I** Oh!
- ST** So I said to Mother Superior -- because the interpreter was on my side, interpreting everything. I said to Mother Superior -- because she's Hispanic - - "[unclear]." "Is it true that she has a sister?" Mother Superior said, "Yes." I said, "Can I adopt her?"
- I** Oh, yes.
- ST** Mother Superior said, "Well, Sara. You're only twenty. You're going to be twenty-one. This child is four-and-a-half years old -- almost five. She's too big for you." I said, "No, but I don't think so." Mother Superior said, "Well, the only way I can do that is to actually definitely take you and we'll see you. But if it's from a blessing from God, you'll have some kind of sign. If not, we cannot." So I said, "Fine." So we were in Fuci, and we had to go to Yokahama, which is like from here to Boston. We went up there, and they were in the rice patties, and you see all these little kids. Now, she's only four-and-a-half or five. They get the net and they pull it in -- all these little kids -- and they bring the rice in the net.
- I** Oh, my goodness.
- ST** And you see all these kids pulling it in, you know? Well, the interpreter went down and told Lorraine. Here I see this big girl -- skinny, tall, big -- walking. Of course, I have a little baby in my arms. Well, I didn't bring her at that time, you know?
- I** Yes.

- ST** I'm saying to myself, "Oh, yes. She is big. Oh, yes. I'm not going to do this." All these questions came. God, if this is supposed to be for me, let me know. Well, Lorraine came running to me, grabbed her hair and started speaking in Japanese. I said to the interpreter, "What is she saying to me? What is she saying to me?" She said, "Tell my new mother that if she combs my hair, I'll look prettier."
- I** Oh! Oh, my goodness!
- ST** Of course, her teeth were all -- they don't have [unclear]. That's it. I said to Mother in Spanish, "Isn't it true that God gave me the sign?" Mother said, "Yes." We took her right there and then.
- I** And they let you have her?
- ST** Yes, they let me have her. I only had nine months to go to court to adopt her, to go to court again.
- I** So this is why she's your second daughter.
- ST** That's why -- yes. That's why Elaine is my second daughter -- right.
- I** That's so interesting.
- ST** Yes. I felt that even though they have different fathers, they have a binder of a mother. And I would be their mother. You always have to belong to something or have something. I said to Mother Superior, "This is a God-send." That's what I wanted. So when I came back, I had two girls. [laughs] Japanese-Americans.
- I** What did your parents say? They must have been amazed.
- ST** Oh, they were so happy. My parents opened their arms. So, I get out of here and I'm saying, "Well, I have two girls, but I should get a boy. Oh, I should have a boy," you know? So I go -- you know me. My father is always yelling to me, "You have to have a goal. You can do it." I go to state and

ask them if -- I put in an application that I wanted -- no, I'm sorry. I went to Catholic Charities first. I asked them and they said to me, "Do you know what a long list we have here? You already have two children. You just had them." He said, "There's no way you're going to be on our list." I said, "Fine." So then I went to State Welfare and I applied. State Welfare says, "Well, if we have anything, we'll call you." I said in Spanish, "I have two Japanese. I am not prejudice." Three days later I get a call from State Welfare that Catholic Charities has a little boy in Waterbury -- Griffin Hospital. A boy was there. But if I want it -- I first have to see it. He was six months. I went in, and here's this little chubby black-hair, sticking up straight. He's Peruvian and American.

I Oh, my!

ST I mean, as dark as can be, compared to my girls. He was dark and everything. They gave him to me. You know, you stay in the room and you hold him to see. I immediately took up to him. Immediately. That's my son, Arthur. Right now he's in Scottsdale. He was born in 1963.

I Oh, okay.

ST It was a miracle.

I Oh, my goodness.

ST I was given in [unclear].

I So, you took on a lot. And you were still working, too?

ST Yes, yes, yes. I took my kids all over. I had them involved in everything I did. And the Lord's been good to me because in 1971, my daughter -- I became pregnant in my second marriage. So I have a daughter, Sandy, who was born in 1971. And my son was born in 1974.

I Oh, okay.

ST The Lord put it so that we have space in between, so my three adopted have no jealousy of the other two. Because I took care of them. I gave them all the attention. And now I give these two. And, like I say, I have been so blessed, and I thank the Lord every single day.

I That's wonderful.

ST And my Elaine is the one that's always been in the agency. Of all the five kids, Elaine is the one -- now, I sold the agency to her and her husband about seven years ago.

I Oh.

ST And they're in the agency. And before I sold it to them, I opened up another agency in New Haven. So, when I sold it to them, I had two agencies. And now they opened up a third agency in Bridgeport. So we have three travel agencies.

I And there's one in New Haven?

ST One in New Haven -- one on the East Side. And one on Main Street here, in Bridgeport.

I Oh, okay.

ST So, we have two in Bridgeport and one in New Haven.

I Oh, my.

ST And Elaine does the same thing. Notary public with the people. She knows it from small -- works with the community. She's very active in different [unclear].

I Fluent in Spanish?

ST Yes and no. Fluent with an American accent. But they all know her from little, so the people come in and they say to me, "Oh, your daughter is so -- I understand her though, but she's so beautiful when she talks Spanish." Yes.

Yes, she does, but with the accent -- yes.

I Oh, that's so interesting.

ST Yes. I've been blessed.

I So, your family has done a lot for the city.

ST And we still do. And we still want to. I am myself, still involved. I volunteer. I work for the Connecticut Community Care, Incorporated. In fact, they just gave me volunteers for the [unclear].

I And what do they do?

ST I go into my elderly -- and I pay their bills, and I read their letters -- their correspondence. If the telephone bill is too much, or they don't know if somebody is charging them, I check their checkbook; I balance it out. Just about anything. If they want to complain that their nurse didn't come in and I should, I take the complaint. I go twice a month to them, and I do that voluntarily.

I Isn't that wonderful?

ST Yes.

I So I still keep very busy.

ST I still take care of people.

I So, how do you think Bridgeport has changed over the last few years? I mean, what do you think about how things are going, I guess, in the city?

ST Well, it was heartbreaking because I loved Bridgeport. To see Bridgeport so -- as far as I grew up, I thought Bridgeport was the most beautiful town in the world.

I Yes.

ST And then to see it down -- tremendously. Factories closing, houses boarded up, burned up, nothing being fixed. It hurts. I mean, it hurts. I grew up on

State Street, and I go by there and I say, "How could something like that happen? Why did it happen?"

I Yes, and when did it happen.

ST Yes. You say, "All those years." And now that I see -- you know, I'd love to give credit to one person, and people say it's Ganim, the Mayor. Beautiful -- if it's him -- or if it's the state or whatever. At least Bridgeport is coming up again. I do see it. And I do love it. And I do feel great! Where I am on the East Side -- I'm right there. I've been there for forty years.

I And the travel agency is where on the East Side?

ST On East Main Street.

I Oh, okay.

ST A block before Stratford Avenue. East Main and Nichols.

I Near the religious store?

ST No. Do you mean on the corner of Stratford Avenue?

I Yes, I guess.

ST Well, where Black was. So, I'm on Nichols and East Main for forty years. I was on the block before, and now I'm on the block after.

I So, how have you seen East Main Street change? Do you think it's getting better on East Main Street?

ST Yes, yes, definitely.

I Oh, good!

ST Yes, definitely. All our stores right there in the six blocks -- all the merchants tried to watch out. We don't see drugs. Selling -- we try to watch the kids. We keep our lights on. We let them know of anything. We'd love to do more, but now the city is helping. Now we've got sidewalks.

I Yes.

- ST** Forty years I've been down there -- holes and cracks. I finally got a sidewalk.
- I** [laughs]
- ST** It's like Hallelujah.
- I** [laughs]
- ST** I mean it!
- I** I know.
- ST** I drive down and I say, "Now these kids can play. They can play hopscotch, like I did. Roller skate if they want, you know?"
- I** Well, somebody must have come up with the idea, right?
- ST** Yes!
- I** It's like the Walk/Don't Walk signs downtown. They never had anything. Every city you go into --
- ST** Right. You see? And it's nice. I'm so happy. Right now I feel, "Gee, at least I'm here to see these things going on." It really is nice. I do still take my time when -- those kids come in and we do income taxes there.
- I** Oh!
- ST** Yes. Like I told you, our agency does everything.
- I** [laughs]
- ST** You come in and they have anything -- jobs or insurance forms to fill out. They come in and fill them out. And I still tell the kids, when I see them so young and so pure and so smart. I mean, I have to be proud of my own race. I see my own kids. When I say 'my kids,' I mean my neighborhood kids on the East Side. They speak English and Spanish. They translate for their grandmother or their mother. And you see them. "[unclear]". "My mother said that [unclear]. She says this." That's intelligence, for a little kid like

that.

I Yes.

ST And for the little kid -- it starts at eight years old. Then I see him at sixteen, hanging around on the corners. Do you know how many times I say honestly, "You can do something." What can they do? What is there to do? Nothing.

I No. There's nothing.

ST There's no YMCA, like we used to have, where the kids didn't have to pay anything, and they would go in.

I In fact, the YWCA just closed down.

ST Well, that's what I mean. Like I say, I guess I'm very humble, and I'm very glad that I am on the East Side. That makes me still see what is out there, and I try to help the kids there all the time. They come in and I tell them, "Hey, listen. Go to night school. Go to high school."

I You can forget easily if [unclear] if you go to the East Side. Yes.

ST Right. I still have some people saying they want to pick up a ticket. "Oh, I'll pick it up on Main Street. I don't want to go to East Main." I say to them, "Whatever you're thinking -- forget it. We're here. I've been on East Main Street for forty years, and I can stay here until two o'clock in the morning, and it's a good area. It's what's put in your mind -- forget it."

I Right. Oh, we have the same thing. People won't come down to the library, downtown. A woman said to me last week -- I finally said, "You're in Easton, and you won't come here?" She said, "Well, I'd rather you send it to me." I said, "Well, I can't because it's too many pages." She said, "But you're in a bad area."

ST You see? Right, right.

I But I guess bad area is all of Bridgeport. [laughs]

ST All of Bridgeport. Yes. That's the majority. I always tell people -- they say to me, "Oh, you're Puerto Rican?" I say, "Why? I don't look it?" I'm Puerto Rican. I'll always say it. Even though I was born in New York -- my blood and my soul is Puerto Rican. And that's what I tell my kids. My kids know they're Puerto Rican. Because that is your heritage. Yes. And I'm proud of it. And I'll always be proud of it. I see too many of the kids nowadays -- maybe it could be just the kids on East Main -- that have it there until they're about eight, and lose it from eight to sixteen. And that's the gap that I -- I would like to know why did they lose it? Maybe they're out on the street more. I don't know.

I Yes.

ST Maybe their parents don't go after them and say, "You're not going there. Stay home." I mean, I used to play on the porch, you know?

I I know. That seems to be the age, and I don't know why.

ST But you see those kids at eight -- they're intelligent! And I give them credit and I tell them -- you know, "You can be a lawyer, you know?"

I I think it's peer pressure.

ST Yes. And I think as some of them -- they don't have the right kind of clothes for school, or they don't have what it takes -- from the home. The financial. I don't know. I don't like to point to the parents, either, because the parents have it hard too.

I Right.

ST I don't like to say, "Well, if a mother would stay home" -- no. I worked. I worked. So it isn't that if the mother would stay home. But I do see there is a gap there, and if we don't get it, the kids are getting wilder, and they're not

getting the home background -- being proud. "No, no. I'd rather go without eating. But I'm not going to do that." Nowadays it's, "Oh, so what. Whatever." You know?

I Is there anything else you want to say before I turn off the tape? I think we've done pretty well. Very interesting.

ST No. I only would like to say that I thank God for my parents. I try to bring my children up the way they showed me -- their principles.

I They sound like wonderful people.

ST Like I say, my dad had the ambition -- showed you to stand up on your feet and look ahead, and stick out your chest, and you'll be proud. And mom just told you God loves you, be humble, help other people. Remember, you have shoes, but how about the other guy? He doesn't have shoes. Take them off - - share them. And so that balanced. One being strong -- balanced our lives. So I'm really proud of them.

I Well, you should be. Well, thank you for interviewing.

ST Thank you.

I That was easy, wasn't it? [laughs]

ST Yes, it was.

End of Interview