

Interview with Miguel Ramirez
Conducted by Sarah Dzedzic
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Landmark West
1 audio file
Video call

Q: Today is April 19, 2023, and this is Sarah Dzedzic interviewing Miguel Ramirez for Landmark West about San Juan Hill. And do I have your consent to record this interview for the Landmark West archives?

Ramirez: By all means, yes, you do.

Q: Thank you. So can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Ramirez: So my name is Miguel Ramirez, and I'm a twin, and I was sixty-eight years old this week. And we grew up coming from Puerto Rico straight to San Juan Hill, which is now Lincoln Center. And we grew up in that neighborhood right there.

Q: Thanks. Can you tell me a little about—you mentioned that your family came straight from Puerto Rico. Can you tell me a little bit about your ancestors there, and what quite of role they had in your family?

Ramirez: My mother came from a family of ten, and they were a very caring, loving family, they were all very close to each other, there were brothers and sisters on both sides. And my mother has five kids, four from Puerto Rico. And the fifth kid came later on, after many years. But she came to New York for a better life and opportunity because it was hard for them in Puerto Rico. They were very poor, and the jobs were, you know, they were desperate, and they didn't pay that well, and, you know, it was a struggle. So my mother came here for a better opportunity with the four of us.

Q: And what part of Puerto Rico did you come from?

Ramirez: On the west side of the island, it's called San German but in Spanish it's pronounced Germán. And it's a beautiful town, it has one of the oldest churches in the whole Caribbean, and it's called La Fortacelli [phonetic] which is a very famous church, and the town too is a beautiful little town.

Q: So what were some of your earliest memories?

Ramirez: I remember that we lived on 61st Street and Amsterdam. And I remember it was a very old tenement, and we lived in a one-bedroom studio on the first floor. And the bathroom was, there was no bathroom in the apartment, the bathroom was down the hallway. So it was a shared bathroom for the entire floor. And I remember there was two beds, my mother and my sister slept in one bed, and me and my brothers, we slept in the other bed. And I remember around the whole room there were holes, you

know, cracked ceilings, there were holes everywhere. And I remember at times you could see the rats going through the walls, and roaches, you know, and it was a very, very tight space for us. But we, you know, although it was tight but we were all very close to each other.

Q: What kind of things did your family do together?

Ramirez: Oh, we would go—I remember going to Central Park, and we used to run and play, and they did have big, big walls. At that time it was considered big rocks but they were like four, three feet high, and I remember we used to climb, me and sister and brother, we used to climb and jump over, you know jump to the ground. And we all thought we were superheroes, and all that. And my mother would take us to the school, the school playground, which was like down the block.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about the school that you went to?

Ramirez: I went to school in the Lower East Side, but my brother, Gus, and Maggie, they went to the elementary school down the block. [0:05:03] Cause we were like two-and-a-half or three years old, so when they moved us out of the projects they moved us to the Lower East Side.

Q: Okay, so can you tell me about some of the other places that you remember from the San Juan Hill neighborhood?

Ramirez: I remember, I think it was for a Thanksgiving Day Parade, like they put the—the waiting area was like where we lived, so we would see a lot of floats, and I remember it was the PT-09, it was like a humongous ship, [unclear] and they come up the block, and wow, it was big and tall, and I was amazed, there was a guy in the front with an American flag, and he waved it to us. It was really nice, and then there was a lot of different floats, and they were waiting on line. And this happened like two or three times throughout, you know, in different years. And that's something that I'll always remember. And there was a guy that, an American guy, that will always be—you know where we grew up, there's always steps, and the steps along where everybody used to hang out, you know, and even today—I live in South Jersey, I made sure my house in the front has steps, cause I get [unclear] from that. And it was a place where you would hear great stories. And talk about their lives and all of that stuff. And there was a guy, he was an American guy, tall guy, very skinny, and I forgot his name, but me and my brother Harry, we used to call him, "Hey You." And he always responded to, "Hey You." "How are you?" "How are you?" And that was one of the things that I remember. And there was all kinds of, you know, there were African Americans, Latinos, and whites, and I remember we all mingled with each other, even in the late '50s.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about, I guess, who the other kids were on the block, who else lived in your building?

Ramirez: They were—I remember there were African Americans, and also many, many Hispanics too. And me and my brother, we were more of the younger crowd. You know, there was a lot of older kids there than us. And I remember, since we lived on the first floor, my mother would always have the window open, and we'd be yelling, "Hey, what's up?" You know, we would call all our friends from the window. And we were always in diapers, I remember we were always in diapers and tee shirts. And it was just, it was great, but a little bit strange because of we had—I remember my mother told us be careful to go to the bathroom, cause you know it was the first floor, and shared bathroom, and anybody, you know, the building didn't have no locks, so anybody from the street could go in, so you have to be careful about that. And it was, I didn't know back then but it was known as the worst neighborhood in the City of New York, but the most diverse community, back then.

Q: Do you remember people speaking different languages?

Ramirez: Just mainly English and Spanish.

Q: And what about in your home, what language did everyone speak?

Ramirez: [Unclear] We're 100% Puerto Rican. My mother always talked in Spanish, and so—I mean, we started talking Spanish, but as the years—as we grew up and everything, she always talked in Spanish, and we'd answer her in English because we understand what she was saying and all that. But growing up like in the projects, it was mainly English that we spoke, but we understood Spanish well. My aunts and uncles, my grandmother, my grandfather, we understood it, but, you know, we spoke English most of the time.

Q: And what kind of work did your mom do? [0:10:01]

Ramirez: We were, for many years, we were on welfare. And the welfare was—to be honest with you, cause it was my mother and five kids, so we didn't have a father. So to me my father was the welfare department. And even now when I speak to my friend, he say "where you from?" And I grew up in the original place where Lincoln Center was. [unclear] "No, Mike, I had a mother"—"well, who's your father?" I say, my father was the welfare department. And it was correct because they gave us the food, the rental money, and then the government surplus came in a box and we all loved that, and my mother would make grilled cheese sandwiches, and all of that. And they would give us peanut butter, jelly, and lard, and meat in the can. It was either—it was for free and it was wonderful, I myself appreciated that.

Q: Did your mom make Spanish food too?

Ramirez: Yes, she always made for us, you know, we grew up with rice and beans. And it took us a while to learn how to eat better, tomatoes and all that, cause at that toddler age, we never liked that, and my mother used to put it there, but we never ate it. So later in life we learned how to—and it was funny and it was kind of embarrassing, because when she made rice, her rice and beans, she had to put the rice there and the beans there. And she gives us with a fork, and I never knew you're supposed to mix it. [Sarah laughs] So the rice all separate, and the beans separate, until one day my brother pushed me and the beans went from this side to the white rice. And it was all in the mix, and then, "Mom, I don't want to eat it. Look what happened." She said, "No, now you're gonna eat it. Taste it. Taste it." And I ate it, and for the first time, I knew how to eat rice and beans together, it was a great taste. And that is something that 95% of Puerto Ricans eat, rice and beans.

Q: I never thought of that, little kids even separating—you know kids like to separate their food, [laughs] but I never thought about the rice and beans separate. How old were you when you realized that?

Ramirez: Oh, I was about three-years-old, yeah. And then later in life I worked at a childcare center, and I remember it was the same thing what I saw, so I had to teach the kids if you put this here and you put that there, you're gonna get a great super taste, and that's how we used to encourage the kids in daycare how to mix the food, and do the taste test. And we shouldn't—touch with your tongues. First taste it, if you like it, eat it, if you don't like it then you don't have to eat it. But you have to taste it, it's important, we're learning about different kind of foods.

Q: So just a little kid like that, how big—like did you ever go outside of the neighborhood? How far outside did you go?

Ramirez: We went, my mother just let us go in the front, and also to the corner, but supervised. Like my sister and brother used to go around, but me and my brother, we're twins, and we were like three, three-years-old. So we used to hang around the steps, on the window sill, and also when my mother took us to the corner to a store, or my brother and sister [unclear]. But she was, my mother always was looking out the window all the time, you know, looking out for our safety, and who we played with and all of that. And I remember the street, we used to use a lot of the trucks, the white trucks, and we used to make designs, and the kids used to play Skelzies, but I didn't know how to play it, but I remember watching them.

Q: What was the game called?

Ramirez: Skelzies.

Q: What's that?

Ramirez: It's like a big square with different numbers, and you take like a—I'll give you an example, like a bottle cap, you go like this, and then it will shoot, and the thing is that you go to a—you follow the number order. So Number 1 was down the squares and you would go there, and then you would try to get it inside the box. And once you get in the box then you would go to make Number 2 and 3, and I think 12 was the end, and the first one to finish the whole thing would win.

Q: Wow! Thank you. [laughs] Um, so I wanted to ask you about if you remember the sounds of the neighborhood. Was it noisy, was there music? [0:15:03]

Ramirez: There was always—I remember hearing police cars, firetrucks, and horns from trucks and buses. And then I remember other kids running around a lot with their bikes and screaming, and yelling, but I remember seeing some fights, but it was more like arguments. And it was like older kids pushing each other and yelling at each other. Like I really don't remember seeing like fist fights and all that. Although we lived in a really, really bad neighborhood, but I guess in my block we were—we were one of the lucky ones. [laughs]

Q: So your building was relatively calm?

Ramirez: A lot of traffic. People would hang out in the front, there was a lot of families going in and out. And I do remember my older brother, Gus, he had asthma, so because there were a lot of holes in the walls, the roaches were considered as an asthma trigger for my brother. So he was always going to Roosevelt Hospital, cause he'd always get an asthma attack. So the triggers—because there was lead, mices, roaches and all that; we all these open holes [unclear] and there was a lot of cracks, and you could see the studs on the walls and all that. And because there was mice and rats, the urine smell and all that. Those were the big asthma triggers for my brother that he always got sick and kept going to the emergency room, many times. And I remember my mother would take all of us to the emergency room cause my older brother used to get an asthma attack, and he would run out of, you know, air and all that.

Q: Yeah, that sounds really difficult.

Ramirez: And us too, we were all—the thing was that one of the—we would all take turns going to the hospital, you know, the hospital was like a common visit for my mother. She always took care of us, and she used to make her own, you know, Puerto Rican medicine and stuff, like eggs with a Mica drink that

she used to mix it. And she used to put a pungent drink, and the pungent drink it's like a super vitamin healer drink. And we'd drink it and we would feel better, it was like a very cheap low-energy drink to do.

Q: Do you know what was in it?

Ramirez: There was egg, milk and with a soda called Mica, which is a typical Spanish, many Spanish people use it, and my mother would, you know, put in the milk and the egg, a raw egg, and put it in there, and she would mix it and make it into like a smoothie. And I remember it was purple. And we would drink it, we would drink it, and then for us, that was like a homemade vitamin. And it did help us.

Q: I mean, yeah, it sounds good. Did she have things that she'd make for you when you were sick with a cold or something?

Ramirez: Uh, she—like I remember—because we were all hyper kids, you know, she would say we were hyperactive, and the fact that my brother had asthma that makes you more, much more hyper. So there was one girl and three boys, so we constantly was running around and jumping and all that, and during the night time, and sometimes we couldn't sleep so we were active. So my mother would boil water like in a little pot, and then she would put a piece of lettuce inside the water, it would boil, and [coughs] and I was told that that would help you sleep better. It was like a tea but a little sweet tea, and she would make the tea and that would help us relax and take us through the night. That was like a homemade, you know, medicine that she used to do, you know. And that was a common way that many of the Puerto Rican families did, cause when I share—when I was older the kids would tell me the same thing what their parents did.

Q: [0:20:00] Wow, I'd never heard of that one before. Was there any sense of like the families on the block helping out, watching each other's kids or anything like that?

Ramirez: Yeah, I remember my mother and a couple of friends, and they were always constantly talking, and hanging out in the front, and I remember playing with kids but not my age, all older kids. And some of the kids were tough, you know like bully kids, but, you know, that's something you get used to it.

Q: Was there a lot of cars that would drive through on the streets too, or was it mostly just kids hanging out?

Ramirez: There was always traffic. It was a one-way street, so, and you had to be careful; we used to play in the street, but when a car came you know we knew you had to move back and let the car go. We only went to the park when my mother took us. It wasn't that much but she did take us.

Q: Was there anything like, um, like church or like a club or anything that you would do together?

Ramirez: There was a Catholic Church down, a big one, down, I think it was towards Amsterdam Avenue. And I vaguely remember we used to go there, the Spanish, like today, they had Spanish mass there. And I remember hearing the choir singing like in an echo, and that was the church [unclear] and it had a beautiful sound, and that is something I will always remember is that sound. It was a warming sound. And also too there were, back then, that was a famous person in jazz; I mean, we were too young to have heard it, but that's like, they had a lot of great jazz players. And there were a lot of great jazz musicians. I remember when I got older, you know, and which I never knew that, so it was poor, it was rough, but it was great things happening like the jazz music, which was very popular in that area.

Q: Do you remember hearing people listening to music on the radio?

Ramirez: Spanish stations, yeah. My mother, her little radio, it was mainly like in Spanish at that time. But when we got to move to the projects we started, you know, doing English and all that.

Q: Um, you mentioned there were a lot of kids around, were there any neighbors that you remember that were older who had been there in the neighborhood for a long time?

Ramirez: No, I don't remember anything, but, since I'm a classical musician with training [unclear], one day—this was like maybe eight years ago—I was watching Leonard Bernstein doing the *West Side Story* with opera singers, which was something that was never done. And one of the opera singers that sang in that show, she was talking about her life, and she said, "I grew up on 61st Street, and this is where my parents lived," and she was part of the opera cast with *West Side Story* that they did with Leonard Bernstein. And I was amazed, I said, "Oh, my God, that lady came from the same block that I grew up in." She said 61st Street on the West Side where Lincoln Center is now.

Q: Wow! Do you know her name?

Ramirez: No, but she does YouTube and she does mention that.

Q: So I want to ask about when you had to move.

Ramirez: Okay.

Q: So, how did that—I mean I know you were young, but what do you remember about that time?

Ramirez: That, um, I remember my mother took us to the projects, and she said, “this is where we’re gonna live.” And one of the early things, [unclear] the projects were called like Houses of the Lower East Side, and they’re six-story buildings, and I remember somebody from the office took me and my mother and all of us to the sixth floor, and they opened the door, and they said, this is where we were gonna be living soon. [0:25:00] So, it was a two-bedroom apartment with a little dining area, with a living room, and a bathroom, and two bedrooms. And I remember when we walked in the house, we saw a closet with shelves, and like three or four shelves, and me and my brother, we all thought that they were bunk beds, so we would say, “Ma, I want this bed. I want that.” And we were arguing and fighting, who’s gonna sleep in what bed, and my mother had to break it to us, that’s no a bunk bed, that’s the closet. We thought those were like little beds.

And it was so nice to look around, and when you look around, there’s no holes in the walls, you know it was painted, it was fresh paint and all that. And there was a stove, a kitchen, and a bathroom. The bathroom was like a luxury thing to have. Then my mother told us that in a couple of weeks, we’ll be moving here. Then my mother told me too that, that they were told like for a couple of months that everyone in this block has to move out, because they’re gonna change the neighborhood. And I think about it, it was David Ross, or Richard Ross, he was in charge of the architect of the whole neighborhood, and they took all these people who’d been living there for years, and they scattered them all around the city.

And now that I think about it, I loved the Lower East Side, but I have a question: how come we couldn’t move there, like a couple of blocks to where they have the Amsterdam Houses, the public housing. And I always thought to myself, how nice could it be if we lived there and gone to the music school that was there. But living in the Lower East Side, it was a great neighborhood, it was wonderful, cause you had all kinds of culture there; you had Italians, the Puerto Ricans, the Jewish people, the Colombians, the African American, the Chinese, and we all went to school together, and we all got along with each other. It was a really amazing time back then. Everyone, you know, what was nice about that is at an early age you learned about many different cultures and the style and the people [unclear], and the way they behaved, cause each culture had different ways of presenting and behaving themselves. Like for example, the Chinese kids were very calm and very quiet, so in the classroom, you know, they were tough but relaxed. With the Black and Hispanic, [laughs] we were all over, hyper, talking loud, and [unclear] and being rowdy. And then we had several of the Hasidic Jews there in the classroom, and they were well behaved. And it was mainly us, the Black and Hispanic, who were more of the rowdy type, and daring type too.

Q: So basically everyone who was living on your block got a letter that said, this is where you’re gonna be moving.

Ramirez: Right, right, right.

Q: So your mom didn't have any choice in where you guys ended up?

Ramirez: Right, right, yes, I guess back then there were case workers, and they came and they assigned us. They did the paperwork, and they said, you gotta report to this place, and that's how we wound up on the Lower East Side.

Q: Were there other people from your neighborhood that ended up living where you were living?

Ramirez: You know, maybe, I could not know, but I never heard anybody who came from the Lincoln Center area. Now that I know where San Juan Hill is, where Lincoln Center was built, to me, that it was like an honor to say I lived there at one time. And they turned it into a humongous music land for all cultures to perform and share, you know, their gifts. And even many a time now I go back and I walk around Lincoln Center, and say, "Wow, it's amazing what they did here."

Q: You said it was an honor to have lived in the place where that was built?

Ramirez: Yeah, yeah. And the thing was that me living there, I feel like I—like I did a circle, because growing up in the Lower East Side, at an early age I learned how to play the tuba. [0:30:05]

Q: Yeah, can you just explain how that happened?

Ramirez: Okay. We had this like a Mother Teresa, young, white teacher, and she loved minority kids. She had a passion for them. So, when my brother—this was PS 31, which was the school across the street from where we lived—and my brother went there when he got to fifth grade, he was in music class and he played the clarinet. And the teacher's name was Miss White. And Miss White was like a dream teacher to have, she was very hip, gracious, talented, smart, and loving. Then when my brother left, then my sister, Maggie, she went to music class too, and Maggie played the tuba, which was a rare thing for a female to do. And my sister Maggie was a really good tuba player, she went through the whole—strange, she played with the All-City High School Orchestra, she went to Music and Art High School, she was very, very talented, and she used to go, she used to play in many groups, and she could have gone to Julliard, but she decided to go into social work, and wound up going with a full scholarship to Cornell University. And then she wound up going on another scholarship to do her Master's in Public Health at NYU. And then she ran a hospital. She ran the Helen Hayes Hospital in upstate New York. She was the first Latino/Hispanic director in charge of the whole hospital.

And then I came in and I played the tuba. My sister told the music teacher, Miss White, to listen to my brother because she said, "I think he has real talent." So I was in the fourth grade, and the fifth grade is a band class, so Miss White told me to come upstairs and play the tuba, and I played it, and she was impressed. So I started playing with the band in the fourth grade. [Unclear] And playing the tuba was a major part of my life because I lived in a troubled neighborhood, and a lot of the kids, they didn't have motivation in their life, so many of them got lost at an early age. And I remember the fights and the little gangs they used to have, you know, and the kids getting high and getting hurt and all that stuff, and the music, it drawn me aside.

You know, like when I was eleven or twelve then I thought of focusing on music, and it kept me off the streets, because, you know, although we all lived in a housing project like this, you really didn't have much of a choice of friends to hang out with, because it was a troubled neighborhood. And there was all kind of cultures there. So the music part opened the door for me to so many places. Let me show you something here. I used to be in the All-City High School Orchestra, and you see where it said Lincoln Center and Avery Fisher Hall at the bottom?

Q: Mm-hmm.

Ramirez: I'm very proud to say that I played there in the All-City High School Orchestra. And that was like a prestige thing to do. My sister played there first, and then when she left, I took her place. And to me that was like an honor, that was something special, because only the best got to play in the orchestra. And in the All-City High School Orchestra, there's only one tuba player, so when you're auditioning, you're going to audition with twenty other kids. And I was so proud, cause I would say, "Damn, I'm from the Lower East Side, and I'm performing, and I got picked to play with the orchestra!"

Q: Yeah. How did you get to—like, what were all the different programs that you ended up doing? What did it look like to play music when you were in school? Like is there after-school stuff, or how did you get the instrument?

Ramirez: Well, let me tell you a sad part. I used to hang out with a lot of troubled kids. And I remember there was a park across the street from where we lived in the projects. The school, PS 31, had a playground in the back. And my friends used to go there, and now I'm talking about like in the sixth grade, sixth grade, and I had these real good friends, but they, you know, they didn't have any goals, and stuff like that, and I remember when I used to be in the park, some of my friends, I was friends with them but I never participated in stuff they did. [0:35:20] So I'd be walking in the park and the kids would take a black cat by the tail and swing it, and just throw it, and I was so surprised. And because the neighborhood had

a lot of drugs and all that, there were needles all over the park, so some of the friends I had would take the needle and inject it in the bird and watch a bird fly, and you could see the bird was out of control. And, you know, I knew at an early age that that was wrong.

And that's why I give credit to my mother, cause my mother taught us to be careful with this and that, and she taught us the difference between right and wrong. And that's why, when I got the tuba, it's more like a safe haven place. So slowly I came practicing and getting involved with a lot of the groups. I went to the Henry Street Settlement, which is one of the founding institutions in the history of America. I went there was a kid, and got involved in a music program, and then later in life, I taught there, I worked in the childcare program, and I loved it. I had all these Chinese kids, and the kids were the one that taught me how to speak Chinese. And there were very few people who spoke Chinese there, and because the kids taught me how to speak Chinese, I was many times more able to help the parents and say, go here, go there, do this. And then I was able to say, go the bathroom, thank you, and good morning, sit down, how are you. And the kids would cry, and I would say, [speaks in Chinese] and that right there, "Don't cry, your mommy's coming." So, it was nice, but the kids all made fun of me when I was learning how to speak Chinese. But the kids, it was funny, I wasn't Chinese, but the kids really taught me how to speak Chinese, because half of the kids there were from Chinese backgrounds. It was nice.

And then playing the tuba, I went to the Henry Street Music School, I went to the Third Street Music School, and then I was able to play with—in junior high school, I got scholarships to go to music camps. I was able to play like with the All-City, with the Manhattan Borough-wide, it was a gifted program for advanced junior high school musicians. So I went to their program, then the All-City, and then I was very fortunate to go to the Julliard Preparatory. And I got a full scholarship, and I just want to share, this was my music teacher, my tuba teacher for fifteen years at The New York Philharmonic.

Q: Oh, wow.

Ramirez: I was able to get a full scholarship at the age of sixteen. And the funny thing was that they told me for your lesson, go up to Room 523. So my appointment was at two o'clock with a tuba teacher, my first lesson. I never had tuba lessons. So I was a kid, so I opened the door and there was nobody there, so I sat down to warm up, and I was just warming up, and somebody says to me, "Excuse me, that's very good." And it was him. And I remember him because I used to go to Young People's Concert, for years, and I said, damn, one day I want to meet this guy. And his name was Joseph Novotny. He passed away, but he was like the top of the top, you know, when you played tuba and you studied with him you were lucky. And he was in demand, and was very popular, and then he picked his own students. So the fact that I was in the Julliard pre-college, I was able to study with him.

And what shocked me the most was that I was in the orchestra too, and the orchestra was amazing, there were kids, you know, from all over the city, but the majority of them were Asian kids. And they were well trained, played violin, cello, and played really good, so we were playing Brahms 2nd, and the thing was that—I don't know if you know about classical music, Brahms 2nd, a famous lullaby, [sings notes], right? So I was playing in the orchestra, all of a sudden, the strings, the violins, the cellos, [0:40:06] I was—I got into it, I was crying, cause it was such a beautiful sound. And here I'm saying, I came from that neighborhood, you know, like at an early age I was able to know the difference. And then sometimes, in my mind I [unclear] when I go back to the Lower East Side, and there's a lot of destruction, and every Saturdays, I would go to the Julliard School, and it was an all day, you know, lesson, you go [unclear] to the orchestra and tuba lesson. And I did it for one whole year, and it was like the greatest part of my entire life to go there. And the music was so beautiful inside the rehearsal room, the sound of the orchestra, the sound they got, it was, it's hard to express but it was like being in heaven. And knowing the fact that, you know, this is my neighborhood, I'm playing where I grew up, you know. It was a unique experience.

And I got to play with many of the greatest student orchestra around the city. I got to play—and one of the hardest parts for me was that when I got to college, the fact that we were on welfare, and we were poor, I didn't have a tuba. So I used play tuba, making [unclear], like [unclear] college, and like even Brooklyn College, I used to tell them, "Look, lend me your tuba and I will do your concert for you." And that was the exchange. So I was doing that a lot, and it was hard for me to go to a major school, a great school, and all those scholarships, while I didn't have an instrument. And the school kept on, "Oh, no, you have to provide for that." [0:42:02] And it was very difficult for me to do that growing up. I didn't go like to Music and Art High School where you learn all the fundamentals. So when I went to Julliard School, I had to do dictation, sight singing, and orchestra arranging, and that was something I remember never having been taught and it was hard for me.

And there was a theory teacher, her name was Miss Goldstein, she was like ninety-five-years-old, and she would tell me, "Yeah, come in." And I was shy, I was in the back, and she said, "Where's your book," I told her, "Oh, I don't have the book but I'll try to get one." And then the next week, she was so—her name was Miss Goldstein, and she'd been at Julliard for years, and she taught both at the upper school and the pre-school, and she came in, she brought all my theory books. I said, "I can't afford this." And she said, "No, no, don't worry, this is supposed to be for you." And because of her, I learned a lot of the theory, dictation, the sight singing, and that was, for me that was like very touching to know that an old Jewish lady—who, I grew up too, in a Jewish neighborhood—she provided for me, and that for me. Those are things that I will never forget.

Q: Yeah, so let me get this straight, you didn't have a tuba, you didn't have a lesson until the Julliard program that you were in in high school, and then when you got to college, you had to essentially work by playing in other orchestras in order to gain access to a tuba.

Ramirez: Yeah, to borrow, and then what happened—well, there's something that you need to know too, that growing up in the projects, at the age of eight-years-old, my mother used to send us to a program called University Settlement Camp, and they took all these poor kids and send them up to Beacon, NY and it was a sleep away camp for three weeks, and my brother and my sister, and my twin brother, we all went there. And one of the most unusual things in life was—I didn't know—I learned about it later—was that Pete Seeger was the one in charge of the whole music program. So we learned, you know like, *We Shall Overcome*, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, *Blowin in the Wind*, and those are all beautiful songs, and later in life [unclear] he was teaching all the protest songs [Sarah laughs] and all that.

But it was, we would eat at six o'clock, and about five hundred kids, we would all go to a little amphitheater, and we were sitting there and Pete Seeger came with two guys, a banjo and two guys, one guitar and another banjo. And they would teach us all these songs, and from six to seven it was called Council and that's where, you know, all the kids come after they eat, and they sing, and then go back to their bunks. And to me that was a beautiful time. [0:45:23] So then every year, we did that for like three or four years, but the second year I went there, before you go to camp you have to have a physical, so my brother had it, my sister had it, and then I came for my physical, and then it was a thing—the doctor examined me and she told my mother, you know, your son has to be tested because we hear a different sound in the heart.

So then they took me to NYU, they tested me and all that. And I never forgot, when they tested me, when they took X-Rays of me, and then they put me in the waiting room for the doctor to come in. My mother was outside signing the papers, and back then, they were interns, young doctors, so he came in the room, and he tells me, he puts on the X-Ray on the light and all that, and he looks at the picture of my heart, he goes, "Oh, my Gosh, I can't believe it." And I say, "What's wrong?" And he goes, "You have this—your heart is so close to your bone that you could die." And then I got scared, I started to panic, and I cried. When my mother came in, "What's wrong." And my mother was very dominant, she was very strong, and you couldn't yell at her kids because she was very protective. And I told her, "Mom, the doctor told me I'm gonna die." "What?" Then my mother screamed at the doctor, "How could you tell him that?" You know, and then he apologized.

But then to make a long story was that at the age of eight my heart was the size of a man. So they had to give me medication to bring it down to its normal size. And eventually they did, but I was excused—because of the heart condition—I was excused from all the heavy sports, all kinds of stuff. I used to have

an elevator pass to go to all the floors instead of taking the stairs, and my twin brother would take my card and fake it, and take the elevator too. And one day we got caught and the lady screamed at me, and I explained to her, I have a twin. And they were all shocked. So they had a to do like a little dot on me to know who was who. And from eight years on, I was always restricted from doing all kinds of sports, so that's why I dedicated my whole life to doing music.

But the interesting thing though, because, I learned this later, because of the heart problems, I had—it created a lot of anxiety. And again, at the time, I didn't know that. So I remember, in junior high school, especially in the high school, I was sitting in English class, and it's like ten o'clock in the morning, and I used to hate to go to that class because I would hyperventilate over it. I would get a panic attack, and I would get so nervous that I would raise my hand, and say, "I have to go to the bathroom." She would say, "You always have to go to the bathroom!" And it wasn't I had to go the bathroom, it's I had to—I would run like run down the hall to catch up to the beat of my heart, because I just felt that, you know, I was gonna faint. And it was, and that was probably due to my heart then. But nobody told me, and I never knew.

But I learned when I was like in my late twenties, I saw the cardiologist—I used to come to Manhattan twice a year—the cardiologist twice a year, and the doctor told me, "Did you get anxiety?" I said, "Yeah, how did you know that? [0:49:17] He told me, "Look, that's part of the condition that you have." And I was so shocked, and brought back a lot of memories, cause I thought for me, you know, if I was to say, "Ma," I got this and this, in my mind I thought, oh, they're gonna take me to Bellevue, the mental ward, and leave me there. And that was my biggest fear, that I didn't want to go to Bellevue because the anxiety attack. I would sweat and my fingers would get very watery, and one time I was playing the tuba, and the teacher told me, "You've got to play it like this, these two notes," and she went like this [touched the tuba], she went, "Oh, my God, what's wrong with you?" And my hand was sweating, and it was because I had anxiety, but I never knew that at all until I was older. And what happened, when the doctor told me that a couple of years later, all my sweating stuff, it went away, because I guess I [unclear].

And there's another part too, when I was in high school, I used to come home, my mother at that time was a nurse's aide, she worked at [unclear] Hospital. The welfare helped her get a full-time job. So when I was twelve-years-old, every time I'd come from my house, I would listen to Beethoven. And we had a big stereo, [unclear]—and I'd be like this, just sitting down for hours, just listening. And my mother would say, "What's wrong? What's wrong?" I said, "Nothing." And then she—she would say, because she didn't understand, cause she thought that listening to Beethoven and all that was funeral music! And she would tell me, "Why are you so depressed? Why do you listen to all that? [0:51:05] So, no, no, so she got scared and she made me see a psychologist. And I saw the psychologist and I told him what I was doing. And then the next day he told my mother, "Listen, nothing wrong with your son, what he is doing is beautiful. He has a gift. Let him do that." He said, "What do you want to do? Go outside and let him play

with all these drugs and traumatized kids? He's doing something beautiful. He's educating himself. He's mentoring himself how to be balanced, and calm down his nerves. So ever since, my mother never, you know, bothered me for that.

And then in my twenties I was playing with an orchestra group, and we were on 14th Street, and we had like a big orchestra, and the conductor guy got late, so the lady said, "Who knows how to conduct?" For years I always had that passion and love, and when she said that, [laughs] I went like this [raises hand]. [Sarah laughs] And she said, "Okay, Miguel. Come on, come up front." And she said, "You know *West Side Story*?" Now, in my mind I knew it, I always knew it by heart. I never talked to her, I never shared with it, but I knew all the parts by heart. So she goes, "Can you conduct the orchestra?" I said, "Yeah, yeah, I know the whole piece." So I started to conduct, and everybody clapped for me, because they were surprised. I did the whole thing, and I knew all the parts, and all that. And then the conductor came back, and he saw me, he goes, "Miguel, where did you learn how to conduct like that?" And I told him, I said, "Watching Leonard Bernstein every week." That was my role model. I learned from that.

Then as the years went by, I went to Mannes School of Music, Julliard School, and all that, and that's when it is was hard for me because I didn't have the tuba. And many times I'd cry and I'd get depressed cause I was saying, "Damn, I'm here at a major, you know, music conservatory, and I don't have any instrument." So to make a long story short, I was in the Mannes School of Music, playing in the orchestra, and when you play in the orchestra, they have to audition you, so I was competing with a lot of kids, and I got picked to play in the orchestra. And then about two weeks later, I'm in the orchestra, and I'm sitting down where I sit, and the conductor says, "Where's your instrument." And I told him, "I don't have one today, but I will have one next week for sure." Cause I used to, you know, run around getting instruments. And then they had to replace me. I was so sad, and I was so—you know, being in the orchestra, that's a prestige, especially if you're a tuba player. That means that you're good and you're competing with a lot of people. I would compete. So they replaced me and I was depressed, and I was crying, I got depressed so I had to leave the school cause I was depressed. And then my grades went down, and then they told me, "You're on academic probation." But they didn't understand that I didn't have a tuba, and it was hard for me. So to make a long story short, they kicked me out of the school because of my academic, my grades, that I couldn't keep up with the program. And a lot of it was due to my anxiety, and also not having an instrument.

So I wound up working in the childcare center. And it helped me a lot, I got married and all that stuff. And then I came to Philadelphia, and I worked in a Hispanic community for years. I worked in different big Hispanic large organizations. I did mental health. I ran a childcare program. I worked in a Latin music school. I was a board member for many of the community agencies. [0:55:00] And then I was—so, moving from New York City to Philadelphia, it was a [unclear] because in New York your life style is

moving; in Philadelphia it was a much slower pace. And there was a lot of heavy racism. You could see when you go on the train the Blacks and the whites sat separate, and when I used to commute there, I didn't know where to sit because you could see it.

By then I got involved with the Philadelphia Orchestra. I was part of the Cultural Initiative Board. And through that board, we were able—the Philadelphia Orchestra was able to bring in more minority conductors, musicians, concerts, and then I was part of the whole thing. I was very active. There was about twenty of us, but I was one of the active ones and I knew about the music. The other people, they didn't play instruments, they didn't understand why I had the passion and all that. So we were able to get the orchestra to play in Camden for the first time, and we did it two years. And we picked the program. It was really nice. And I worked with them for ten years, cause it was a special grant from the Pew Foundation, that they gave to the orchestra to start a Cultural Diversity Board. Because the orchestra, for years, didn't have minorities, and they didn't draw that crowd.

So, I'm retired now, and my last day on the job, I was working for the City of Philadelphia in the health department. So I went to see, my annual check with the cardiologist, and the same day I retired, my last day, that Monday, I was in the hospital, and I had a major heart operation. I had my sister, cause she worked with [unclear] in New York, the hospital. She knew all the top doctors. So I had a doctor named, Dr. Girardi, who worked at New York Presbyterian, and he's known as like the top of the top. And he gave me like a ten-hour operation. They took out my heart and they put in two mechanical valves. They gave me three by-pass, and then they took off—it's called an aneurysm repair, it's like a main valve that runs through your heart, and the main valve had like a popup balloon, and they told me that, if that happens, you could die. So they deflated, they sewed it up, and then they gave me a pacemaker too. And this been ten years.

And I'm still involved with music. I play, I'm in South Jersey, where I play with major groups, and I'm doing something now that I always loved doing; I'm taking conducting lessons. And the people who I'm conducting with, I could be their great grandfather. [Sarah laughs] And we have, I'm gonna be honest with you, there's an Asian girl, her name is Jiannan Cheng, she's a conductor at Rowan University, and she teaches the orchestra, and age-wise we're almost like thirty years apart. But we communicate so well, like, and you know she tells me what she learned, and I tell her what I learned, and we both have different ways to express our own thoughts. And she even told me, like now I know that I could've been—instead of being a tuba major I should've become a conductor. In a real way, because the conductor, you don't need an instrument, you only need the baton. And the conductors, you are the instrument. But I was shy to show that.

And then the other day I was watching CBS from Washington, DC, there's a lady named Tania León. She's a famous conductor, and composer, and that was the lady, when I went to 14th Street and they told me to conduct, she was the one that gave me free lessons because of that. And her name is Tania León. And she got the Academy Award, you know, that's one of the highest awards you could get. So conducting, writing, and all that. And for me, that was an honor, cause that was my first free teacher, and she gave me two lessons, but I could say, that's my real profession, teaching. And then the lady from Rowan College she confirmed that—I got emotional, cause she confirmed it, she said, "Miguel, you are a conductor. You know your stuff. [1:00:01] You have stuff that many conductors have to learn. You have it natural in you. And I was so, so happy, because it was there, but, you know, I was afraid to share it.

And that's why, when I say, from 61st Street, I go back to Lincoln Center, it brought me back. And I just feel that that, when I went to Julliard and all of that, I felt that I went home, because my neighborhood—in the Lower East Side, too, it was rough. A lot of my friends, they died, they got shot. In fact, I used to give concerts in Sing Sing, Riker's Island, Bedford Springs. And one time we were in Riker's Island, we were on the stage, and it was a cold winter day, and we were about to play, and I hear—my name is Spanish, Miguel—they call me Micky, so I hear somebody go, "Micky. Micky. Micky." I'm looking around, and there was one of my old friends since childhood, and he was in jail. I hadn't saw him for years, and that's where he was all that time, he was in jail. And he was so happy to see me. And I got a little teary eyed, and I said, damn, he was just a kid. And he was a smart kid and all that, and he wind up with the wrong crowd. And there were many kids there, many kids that didn't have the opportunities that I had. I have a reason, and the motive to continue, and I had many support systems. I had the church, Father Burns was a good—we were Catholic, so he always kept in touch. And Miss White, would always follow us wherever we went. [1:01:46] In fact, when my mother got pregnant with my younger sister, Lisa, my mother had to go to [unclear] for a week, and Miss White volunteered to watch us in the housing project. So she was our caretaker for the whole week when my mother was giving birth.

Q: Who is that person, again? Can you explain?

Ramirez: What?

Q: Who was that person?

Ramirez: Miss White, our music teacher.

Q: Oh, wow, she was the one who watched you when your mom was in the hospital?

Ramirez: And she became my sister's godmother because of that. And Miss White, she was like our Mother Teresa. Yeah, she was like was an angel. She always cared for us, she always—she came to my concert. I used to play at [unclear], and it was in the daytime. Can you see the dates?

Q: I can't see the dates. Can you hold it up higher. A little higher? Oh, I still can't, it's a little too small.

Ramirez: Alright, but anyway, this is like 1979, at Carnegie Hall. And I remember, you know, I was playing with the Youth Orchestra of New York and I said, what a great orchestra, it's an honor to be in. And they take kids there from twelve to twenty-one. So I was very good in my instruments, and I played five seasons with them. And we used to play three concerts per year at Carnegie Hall. So, I don't want to brag, [Sarah laughs] but I played eighteen times, loved it, I loved it. And we played all of the major works, professionally. And I remember, I invited my teacher, Miss White, and we did a piece called *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Maurice Ravel, it's a big Russian piece. And at the end there's a section called, *The Great Gate of Kiev*, and there's all this brass in it. Then she came over and said, "Miguel, I heard you play. It was so beautiful. You were the only tuba player. And you were so loud and powerful. And you're representing your community." I was in tears because she came. And she was my teacher from fourth grade, and she was the one who really pushed me, you know, to explore music, stay off the streets—cause back then the streets were rough, you know. And to give an example, I was kind of embarrassed of being Puerto Rican, because back in the '60s and the '70s, the newspaper always put down the Puerto Ricans as being crooks, and rapists and all, and that wasn't true. But that was how we were classified. So wherever I went, I was kinda embarrassed to say that I was Puerto Rican. But not now. Now I could say, oh, it's beautiful to be Puerto Rican. [1:05:02]

And another thing about my mother, my mother did not like my friends so she always kept me away from them. And slowly the music just dragged me across and all that. I didn't fit in the school, but at least in my heart I could say, I went to Julliard, went to Mannes School of Music, I played Carnegie Hall eighteen times, I got involved with the Philadelphia Orchestra. I'm studying with three different conductors now, and I pay for my lessons. And that made me so proud, because that's something I could never do. And to me, taking conducting lessons is like being in heaven. I love it. For one hour, it's like going to a psychiatrist. You [singing notes] and I love it, it's self-expression. And they asked you, how do you feel when you do this? So I expressed myself, and they all told me, you're very musical, you have a lot of great talent, because you're able to talk and express yourself when you conduct. And they all told me that's something that takes years to learn, and you know this.

And that's why I say that from 61st Street I made a circle, you know. I didn't graduate from Julliard but I was there. I got friends that I grew up with that are minorities. I had a great friend, a French horn player, trombone player. He was like an assistant principal, a French horn player of the New York City

Philharmonic for years. But he died because of cancer. I have a good friend, another Puerto Rican, that he plays first trumpet with the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra, and he grew up on 113th Street in the Carver Houses, the housing project, just like I did. I grew up downtown, he grew up uptown. And there were like ten great minority players that were super good that we all came from the projects. And I remember one guy named Leslie Dunner, he was an African American, he played the clarinet. He wound up going to Albany Music College, it's a great college, and we grew up together. And there was a conductor in Washington, conducting [unclear] to go to Tanglewood to study with Bernstein. And me and him were sharing the concerts when we used to play around the city, because I used to play at the Housing Authority, the Harlem Philharmonic and all that stuff. So Leslie said, come on Miguel, let's audition for Tanglewood. And Tanglewood's like the best camp to go for classical training for the summer. You go there like for the whole summer, you get private lessons, play with the orchestra. And again, I wish—no, I can't do it, I can't. No Miguel, you should do it, you should do it. I know you could do it. So here took the initiative, I didn't go because I was shy. But he got in and when he came back he said, Miguel, there were a lot of guys that you are better than, and they got accepted, so you could've got accepted too. And now, his name is Dr. Leslie Dunner, and he conducts all over the world now.

Q: What do you think it was that kept you motivated with all the challenges that you had, with not having an instrument, and having to just work ten times as hard, [laughs] trying to find an instrument?

Ramirez: I think that the classical music, especially listen to Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, [unclear] that gave me like a safe haven. I knew, when I listened to that stuff, I felt home. I used to go many of the Philharmonic concerts and all that stuff, and I used to go in person. And when I went, I just felt like, this is where I belong, this is where I belong. And I felt inner peace.

Q: And you actually went to the places that were built as part of Lincoln Center after they were built?

Ramirez: I got to see Lincoln Center when I was about, I was there about thirteen or fourteen years old. But Lincoln Center was already built, but I knew that it was right where Fordham University is. I knew that. And then I remember there was like a big armory. Can you hold on a second.

Q: Yes.

[INTERRUPTION]

1:10:33

Ramirez: But I just want to share with you, and you're gonna like it, you're gonna like it. [Sarah laughs]
This is actually a picture, when we lived on 61st Street, this is me and my brother.

Q: Oh, my gosh! Yeah!

Ramirez: And this was the armory I was talking to you about. There was an armory either a block away or around the block. Now just take a lucky guess, which one do you think is me?

Q: [Laughs] Um, hmm, the right?

Ramirez: You mean this one?

Q: Yeah.

Ramirez: This is me, because you see I have a big forehead. [Sarah laughs] And this is the way we used to dress, and my mother, you know, for Easter and for church, this is the way my mother used to dress us.

Q: In little suits.

Ramirez: Yeah, and this was when we were like three-years-old. And this is actually where Lincoln Center is now.

Q: Yeah, wow.

Ramirez: And these are my grandkids now. And I hang out with them, I would say like eighty percent of the time with them. I take them out to parks, we play, we laugh, and all that. My wife get a little embarrassed because I have a lot of great stories that I tell them, my grandkids. And the kids like it too, they like to hear my stories. So these are my grandkids.

Q: Oh, so cute!

Ramirez: This one here, his name is Riley. She's half Puerto Rican and half Irish. And this one here, he's my son, my son married a girl that already had a kid, but he, you know, that's like his own son, so he's Irish, and the rest are a hundred percent Puerto Rican.

Q: Yeah? Is your wife Puerto Rican?

Ramirez: Yeah, yeah, and she's from the Lower East Side too. So I'm proud to say that. I love it, I go there a lot. Then when my mother passed the other day—let me show you a picture of—I got a picture of—you know, this picture here of my mother, I'm gonna blow that up and put it here.

Q: That's great. Can you show it to me a little bit closer again?

Ramirez: This is 61st Street.

Q: Oh, I think it went away from the...

Ramirez: And a sad time, this is my mother, I took care of her the past couple of weeks. Ninety-one years old. She died of cancer, and she died yesterday.

Q: I'm so sorry.

Ramirez: And for us, we had a mother and father—I mean, we didn't have a father, but she [pauses] she taught us how to be strong, and she had this thing with her voice that you always have to [unclear]. And in my life, I was always extra special to any female around; she taught that you have to respect females, you can never hit them, and that's what we did. And that's the value that my mother taught us. In fact, when I was like thirteen-years-old or something like that, my mother showed me how to hold a girls' hand, what to say, and what not to do. And she taught us that. I want to show you a picture of my brother and sisters, so you can have an idea. Have you met any of my brothers and sisters yet?

Q: No, I haven't.

Ramirez: Oh, okay, cause there's Lisa, Maggie. [1:15:00] I want to share with you. This is my conducting teacher. She's beautiful.

Q: Yeah. Yeah.

Ramirez: She's at Rowan University. And I love, I study with her once a month, and I love it.

Q: So there's Lisa, Maggie, Harry, Gus, and you?

Ramirez: Gus is the oldest, and Maggie is next. And they both went to elementary school on 61st Street. We were, me and Harry, we're twins, and we were too young to go to school, though, you know, we played in the street and all that.

Q: I wanted to ask a question, just to say, you kind of talked about this a little bit here and there, but I wanted to ask you directly, what was the, like ultimately what was the impact of having to move out of the San Juan Hill neighborhood for you?

Ramirez: Well, I mean, I wish I coulda stayed there, you know, and I coulda gone to school there. And I mean, they sent us to Lower East Side, so for me to say—I mean, I think we were lucky that they took us there. Like my mother lived in the same projects—she passed away—sixty-one years. And when the truck came, the van, [voice cracking] and they put her body inside the van to take her to upstate New York, it was like my mother left the project where she raised us. And to me, we were lucky for the opportunity to live there, cause it was a [unclear] and every day there was a lot of stuff happening, but for me, the teachers and the courses in the music program is what made that special for me to live there. And it made me a better person in life. I could have easily gone with gangs, shooting, like the rest of the people who got into drugs and alcohol. And to this day, I never drank and smoked, because at an early age, I knew that was wrong to do. And even the doctor I would see every year that would tell me, if you get into drugs and alcohol you could forget about your life. And he was right, and [unclear].

So, when I went to New York Presbyterian, I really had my second life. Because I had that major heart surgery ten years ago, so, when I had that operation I said to the doctor, Dr. Girardi, can you guarantee I'm gonna live? He goes, "Look, Miguel, I'm gonna be honest with you, a lot of people, they make it, and they don't. And I cannot promise you you're gonna make it. But I do know one thing, we do this operation many, many times. And all I could tell you is I'll do my best." And that's what he did. And I was lucky, cause that operation, a lot of people don't make it through.

So, the music, really, even now it takes me a long, a long way. There is a famous composer named Gustav Mahler, and he's a terrific composer, and his second symphony is called, *The Resurrection Symphony*. It's a one-hour piece long. But the last movement he talks about—and he dedicated the whole symphony, cause he had two daughters at early child that died of a heart problem. So he created a symphony about saying that when you die, you're life keeps going on. And when you hear the orchestra and the chorus at the end, you feel that present, that when you die, your life goes on. So I really want to do is, in my mother's memory, she's going to be placed in the church and then she's going to get buried. We're going to skip the traditional—the viewing and all that—my friends are going to play music for her and then we're all going to speak. But I want just to play the last four minutes of Mahler's Second Symphony and then talk about that when you die you go to heaven, and when you die, you never die

cause your life continues, it keeps going, it never stops. And when the orchestra plays, you feel it and you see it, and it's very powerful. And that's something I want to have the audience know, that this is who my mother is. And I want to play that and say that she died, but she keeps moving. We're still here but she keeps moving. That, to me—you know I cried I when I listen to Mahler's music. It gives me a better understanding and foundation that, you know, this is part of life, and you gotta keep going. [1:21:12]

And I just felt that, I was blessed to have a mother like mine, she's very strong. We didn't have a father. And we were raised with belts, and slaps and all that. But we were all boys, a lot of boys, and we were tough, so she had to put us in place. But the nice thing is that we came from a rough neighborhood, but we all did well. And I want to let you know that there were thousands of families too that had great kids. And many people talk bad about these poor neighborhoods, and that's not true, there are millions of families and they're good families with good family values. But what I had that was different was that I had the support system, my music teacher, the Henry Street Settlement, the New York, the university, Julliard, Mannes School of Music. I had the special privilege to go through that path with the music, cause the music took me there. And I could have been in the streets and all that. So, my brother became a director of a big rehab in New York. My sister became the Director of Helen Hayes. My brother, Harry, is a junior high school teacher—and he had to retire—for forty years. And then my younger sister, she has her own coffee business, her name is Lisa, and that was the—Miss White was her godmom.

And then there was me. I didn't really finish school, but I felt that in my life time that, you know, that I have what they call the university of the streets. And I just feel that, you know, that I learned a lot and I had a special opportunity, and the tuba took me to many places where I could never have gone. And when I went to, the first time to Julliard School, the orchestra, is what made me feel at home, the All-City Orchestra. This is where I grew up. So that's why I got the connection that I crossed [unclear].

I hope I didn't bore you, but—

Q: Oh, my gosh, no. No, I'm so glad to be able to hear your story and all the places that you've gone to, and about your family. Do you still have any family connection to the Lower East Side?

Ramirez: Oh, yeah, yeah, a lot of families. In fact I'm meeting with them because I told the director of the Henry Street Settlement that I'd love to be in the board. So, they know I worked there, they know my story, the things that I told you, and they told me they would love to have me on the board. Cause they told me that you're a product of the neighborhood, you lived here, you work here and all that, and you have an amazing story. So, I'm in the process now, like in a couple of weeks, I got a big week, some kind of board warming. I told him that, I know you're looking for financial stuff but I could help to develop programs in making this place better.

I'll give you a short example. Henry Street has an arts building, it's called Abrons Art Building, and it's music and art. Now many years ago when I was there, they had orchestra stuff and all that. Now, that's all gone. So I wrote them a letter saying, look, they have a lot of Asians there, it's very important that you should start a Suzuki violin class. [1:25:09] And that would bring a lot of the kids in, because playing the violin, and the music, it gives you, you know, your inner self, a lot of strength. And you're able to learn how to play, and to share, and to tell the world that you own your voice. So, I'm trying to tell Henry Street that they need to connect with the Julliard and the Mannes School of Music, cause they have youth programs, and they need to connect and bring those two programs to the Lower East Side to share them with these all these troubled kids. Like I told them they need to develop a music therapy program, cause there's a lot of kids with many mental health problems, and you know, special needs, and the music therapy will do wonders for these kids. So, hopefully they'll put me on the board. They told me that they're very interested. And that's what I'm gonna do, so.

Q: That's great.

Ramirez: And [unclear] I did something yesterday, [voice cracking] I always have my mother's cell, and I couldn't believe that she passed away, so I called her at four o'clock in the morning and she didn't answer. And that's when I realized that she's gone, you know. But the only memory I have now is that she taught me a lot of beautiful things in life. And, you know, I just thought that I was lucky to have a mother like mine, although we didn't have a father. Our father had, he had a Cadillac, he had a boat, he had a trailer, and he didn't really care for us. But, my mother did and I'm very grateful for that. And I'm very grateful for my teachers, for the music programs, to the Welfare Department, the Henry Street and all that, and also the housing projects who provided and subsidized for us to live there. And I was the last one to leave the projects. And there are many people that don't like the projects, but I loved the projects. A lot of great things happened there. A lot of great people were there, you know, and I was very fortunate that I came onto it through that system.

Q: Well, I'm really grateful that I was able to hear about you and your mother today.

Ramirez: Thank you.

Q: Yeah, and the history that you've been part of creating, and your siblings too.

Ramirez: Yeah. My mother, you know, made sure that we all did well, and everybody lives in great houses, upstate New York, and all that. My sister has a coffee place in California, she does great. And my sister, Maggie, was the main one who took care of my mother like in the past six months, cause my

mother was very independent, for years. And what kept my mother alive—this will make you laugh—she was a salsa dancer, she loved to dance. And there's a summer festival they have every year, 116th Street, which is called, in Spanish Harlem, The Market, La Marketa. And they have, every Saturday, bands and djs, and she brings all her friends and they dance for hours and hours. And that's what kept her young. I had many friends, I would go places and they would tell my—they would think that I'm her husband. And I'd say, no, that's my mom. [Sarah laughs] Cause my mother really looked young for her age, although she was ninety-one.

Q: Wow.

Ramirez: Thank you so much, and thank you for understanding and listening. And I'll go and find a picture of my family and I'll send it to you in an email.

Q: Yes, thank you. That would be great, or you can text it to me too. You have my number, I think.

Ramirez: And when you get a chance, I was hoping, cause I was the one who found information about you and I shared with my family, and I was pushing my sister to get mom interviewed. And my mother was gonna do it, but she was getting less and less and she couldn't do it. So when you get a chance, speak to Maggie, cause she gave me a lot of great inspiration.

Q: That would be great. Thank you so much. Yeah, I'll be in touch over email. And I might ask you to help me with spelling for some of the places that you've been, and the people that you mentioned, just in case, so they can be accurate and things like that.

Ramirez: Sure, yes. Thank you so much, and if you need anything just let me know.

Q: Okay.

Ramirez: I just hope that you get to speak to Maggie, cause that's an important part of the history.

Q: Does she live in New York City?

Ramirez: She has an apartment in New York City and upstate New York. If you want, I could send you through email, her number or her email, and that way you could talk to her.

Q: Okay, yeah, that sounds good.

Ramirez: And thank you so much, Sarah. And have a nice day.

Q: Thank you so much. Bye, Miguel.

Ramirez: Thank you. Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]