RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH D.H. FIGUEREDO

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

CARIE RAEL

Carie Rael: This is Carie Rael. I am sitting here with Tania Mota. We are interviewing Dan Figueredo in his home in Piscataway, New Jersey, on June 19, 2018, for the Latinos in New Jersey Project with Dr. Lilia Fernandez. We are going to start off at the very beginning. Can you please tell me when and where you were born?

Dan Figueredo: I was born a long time ago. I was born in Cuba in 1951. I was born in the city of Guantanamo, which is fifteen miles away from the American base, but I was raised in Havana. Then, we left Cuba. My parents and I left Cuba in early 1965.

CR: Can you describe the community in which you grew up in Cuba?

DF: Well, my father worked for the government. His position, there's no equivalent for it, but it was a national position. It was in the Ministry of Public Works, which can be compared maybe to the State Department in the U.S. He was in charge of a project--the objective was to build highways connecting all of Cuba, that was the project. He was the guy in charge of making that project happen.

We moved to a suburb that was modeled on an American-style suburb. Development in Cuba imitated a lot of what the U.S. was doing at that time. He bought a house there. We moved there, so I grew up in a development that was developing. There was a lot of land, a lot of space, a lot of fields. It was great for me because I would go out wandering around and look at the construction that was going on and just play there. My friends were all great. One kid was the grandson of an American who moved down to Cuba and stayed there. The other one was the son of an executive, a black Cuban, Afro-Cuban, who worked for the Racing Commission. Another was the son of a guy who owned the franchise of the Encyclopedia Britannica in Cuba as well as a teacher. We grew up together. We were just kids. We were just playing and doing all kinds of different things that you do as kids. In the summer, I would spend every summer with my grandmother in Santiago, which is where the Cuban Revolution began. It was very exciting because Havana was very quiet, when in Santiago there was a lot of fighting going on. In the summer, I would hear about the fighting. That was the community. That was it. It was just kids doing things. [Editor's Note: The Cuban Revolution was an armed revolt led by Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement against the military dictatorship of President Fulgencio Batista. The revolution began in July 1953 and lasted until the rebels replaced Batista with a socialist state on January 1, 1959.]

Tania Mota: What were your parents' names?

DF: My father's name was, and still is, Danilo, named after a character in an operetta, *A Merry Widow*, Count Danilo because his father, my grandfather, loved that operetta. My mother's name is Norma. I don't know who she was named after, but that's her name, Norma.

CR: Did your parents tell you stories about growing up in Cuba when they were younger?

DF: My father did. My mother was a quiet person. She didn't really share much about her life. She didn't really like to talk about personal matters. My father was an orphan. His father died when my father was a year old, and then his mother fell in love with this other guy and

essentially, I don't want to say she left my dad, but she was with the other guy. So, his aunt, my father's aunt, raised him. He grew up with my aunt, and she was okay, but she didn't work. She didn't have a lot of money. Her little place was attached to her brother-in-law, who had a big business in warehousing in Cuba. That's how my father grew up. The thing was that because he didn't have a father, once he finished elementary school, the uncle who was giving money said to him, "That's it. I'm not responsible for you, so you figure out what to do." Then, my father started working very young. I don't know how old he was, but I want to say about fourteen. On his own, he managed to get a high-school equivalency thing. Then, he went to a business school. I think in the U.S. it would be like a community college concentrating in business. He did that. Then, from that moment on, he started working for the Cuban government. My mother was a teacher, but she only taught for one year because I was born and then she stopped teaching.

TM: What was your first language? Did you grow up speaking Spanish and English?

DF: No, Spanish was my dominant language. My father knew a lot of English. I don't know how proficient he was because I was a kid, but he knew a lot of English. The thing is that the English that he learned, at least in Cuba, is not what people speak here. So, when he got here, it wasn't the same. He had to figure that out, but in Cuba it worked for him. I think he read a lot more in English than he could actually speak. For example, my father could never say "shrimp." He would say, "Sha-rimp, sha-rimp, sha-rimp." He could never say "shrimp," but he could read English. That was part of the reason why he was working for the government. My mother didn't speak English and she never learned English. I took some English classes in Cuba, but I wasn't really paying attention. When I got here, I didn't really speak English. I still don't speak English. I struggled with it, but I had to pick it up. It was my fault. I mean, I just wasn't interested as a little kid in that.

CR: Do have any favorite childhood memories that you would like to share?

DF: I have a lot. I had a fortunate childhood, so I have so many, but I'll concentrate. My father worked a lot. He worked long hours because he was working with the government. He was always going someplace, going to a meeting, going to a conference. He was involved in civic organizations as well, never politics, but civic organizations. He made it a point of giving his Saturdays to me, and nothing could take that away. Whatever it was, Saturdays were reserved for me. Every Saturday, I knew I would spend the whole day with my father. Growing up in the Caribbean, we would go and do things. We would spend a whole day at the beach. We would look at the fortresses on the island. The one that I remember the most is when we were looking for Hemingway because Ernest Hemingway had a house in Cuba. He was very popular; everyone liked him. He was very friendly with all the Cubans. He drank a lot, and there were three bars that he frequented all the time. One Saturday, my father said, "I'm going to take you to meet Hemingway." I didn't know who Hemingway was, and my father told me. Then, we went to Old Havana, which is the old colonial part in Cuba, which is common in Latin America. You have it in Cartagena, in Colombia. You have it in *Viejo* San Juan in Puerto Rico. We went and we never saw Hemingway, but I remember just going with him to the three bars that Hemingway went and meeting people along the way. That's a memory that stays with me.

TM: Do you know how your parents met?

DF: My father was teaching some business-related course. When he got his degree in business, he didn't work right away. I don't know what a business degree means when he got that. The same school had another school in--my father was born in a place called Manzanillo and that school had a similar school in the city of Guantanamo, so my father went there. He was doing other work as well, but he taught at night. He taught night school. He taught a business course. My mother, who was a teacher, was taking a class during the day there. I don't know what she was taking. He saw her and fell in love with her. Her father owned something like a department store, and he saw her at the store and that was it. He fell in love her. I don't know anything else because they never talked about it. All I know is that he saw her and fell in love with her. Her relatives didn't like him, but it doesn't matter. I don't have all the details because they never talked about stuff like that. So, that was the story.

CR: Did you grow up religious?

DF: Well, yes and no. Supposedly, at that time, the official state religion in Cuba was the Catholic Church, but people were really lax about it. People used to say, "I am Catholic and I'm Cuban." My father was a Presbyterian. He did not like the Catholic Church. I don't know the details of that. He was a Protestant, and he did go to service. He was also a Freemason, which was a very big deal in Latin America at that time, even in the U.S. He was much more involved with Freemasonry than with the Presbyterian Church. My mother, she didn't really go to church. My father basically said to me when I was a little kid, "I believe there is a God and God is in my life, but I will never tell you who is your God and which God to follow. You must decide that on your own." He left it at that, so he never enforced that. I didn't particularly grow up religiously. I did go to mass and I'm not sure why. I just went to mass, and then sometimes I went to my father's church. There were not as many Presbyterian churches, so sometimes he actually would go to a Baptist church. He would take me with him, but he never enforced it. My mother was kind of lax about it. I grew up with the knowledge, which I still have, that has nothing to do with religion, that there is God. I don't know what life is like, and God is in charge. So, I believe that, but that's it. I don't impose my beliefs on anyone. I don't talk about them unless I'm asked. My father was the same way, and my mother was the same way.

TM: What memories do you have in attending elementary school in Cuba?

DF: It was an exciting time, because there was a revolution going on. It was a lot of fighting, and sometimes schools were shut down. Mine is sort of all over the place, and this goes in another direction. I had polio when I was a year old, so I didn't really walk for a while. Because of that, my father hired tutors to come and teach me. I was home studying every day with a teacher. That was a little bit of that. Eventually, my father took me to a famous school called La Salle, which is the La Salle Brothers. They're all over the country, in the U.S., and in the world. I went to that school, La Salle school. At the time, the Cuban government took it over, so I had militia people teaching me. It was not a steady thing, but the one thing that was constant in my life was reading. There were hundreds of books at home, and I was always reading. I did more reading than I probably did for school. As I said before, it's not a clear-cut answer. It's all over the place.

CR: Did you grow up in a political household?

DF: Well, it's sort of complicated. My mother had two brothers who went to the mountains to fight with Fidel Castro against the government, but that was kept quiet. No one really talked about it. My father felt President Batista, who was the guy that Fidel Castro overthrew in 1959, was doing good things for the country, but he was a little too strong. But he worked for Batista, so he kept his opinions quiet. They didn't do politics in my presence, so I did not grow up in a political [household]. Except for knowing that my mother had two brothers who were in the mountains fighting, no one talked about it. My parents did not talk about politics. He kept his distance from that. He thought it was more important to be family-oriented and accept family members rather than get into politics.

CR: Can you share some memories you have of the Cuban Revolution?

DF: Well, it was a very exciting time for me. I mean, I was a little kid, so later on I realized that people were dying, but I wasn't thinking about that. There are many stages to the Cuban Revolution. The Cuban Revolution essentially begins July 26, 1953, which is how the movement is known as the Movement of July 26th. It began at that point. I had no idea what was going on.

Then, I would go to Santiago de Cuba every summer, which was where the revolution was really taking place. I heard stories. My grandmother was friends with the mother of two of the heroes, of martyrs of the Cuban Revolution who were murdered. I knew that they had been killed during the carnival in Santiago, which was usually in July. My uncle took me to the carnival. Think of a parade, think of the Puerto Rican parade, Columbus Day parade, but with a lot of music and a lot of dancing, think of New Orleans, I think that would be the best [comparison], Mardi Gras, so in Santiago, that was what it was like. There were organized parades, but then there were long hours where people just went to the streets and they walked and they danced. There was rumba dancing, a lot of places where you sat down to drink.

My uncle, who lives down the shore--he's not much older than I, but he was my uncle, he's about fourteen years older--so he took me to one of those parades. We were sitting in this tent, where young people were gathering. They were drinking beer and rum because Cubans didn't really drink wine. I'm sitting with him, and there was this bar and there's a guy who is an officer in the Batista armed forces. He has a uniform on, so I think he was in the army. Then, a young kid, like a university student, because the revolution in Cuba was led by university students, this university student comes up to him, hugs him, walks away. The next thing I saw was the guy's head drop to the side, and then he slid down the bar. He had been knifed in the back by that student, had been assassinated by that student. At that point, as the guy was falling down, someone said, "He was killed. They killed him. They killed him." My uncle took my hand, and we just ran out of the place. That's one memory that I have.

The other memory that I have is in 1961 during the Bay of Pigs invasion. My father and I were directly under the first attack. The strategy was to wipe out Castro's air force. Though most history books and scholars tell you that the Bay of Pigs invasion began on April 17, 1961, it really began on April 15th, which is a Saturday, 1961 at seven-thirty AM, because I was there

and I saw it. The reason we were there--and, again, as I said, my stories get lengthy and complicated--my father worked for the government. When Batista left Cuba and Fidel and Raúl Castro took over the government, my father kept his position because he was not a political appointee. He had expertise, so he stayed in the same position. At one time in the 1960s, the Cuban government issued a decree, which is, "Everyone has to do volunteer work. If you don't volunteer for the revolution, you are definitely not for the revolution; therefore, you are anti-revolutionary and we could arrest you." In 1960, my father, on Saturdays, the department that he oversaw went out to the sugar fields to cut sugar cane. He took me with him because it was a party. No one did any work. He took me with him.

That Saturday, April [15th], 1961, we left home, and there was a bus that would pick up the workers and take you to the sugar fields. We all met in this huge plaza that today is called *La Plaza de la Revolución*, the Plaza of the Revolution. We met there. It's huge. It's maybe like five blocks long, ten blocks wide, a lot of ministry buildings. Just think of the Washington Mall in D.C., and that gives you a good perspective. Right near it is a military base and an air force base. Anyhow, that field is there, so we are near the field. When the invasion began, planes, piloted by Cuban exiles flying from Guatemala, went to Cuba, and their objective was to destroy the Cuban air force, which is a tactic used, especially at that time. If you were invading a country, you destroy their air force. Because we were so near, we were like right next to the fighting, I saw the planes flying over me and shooting, and I saw the bullets and all of that fighting. It was very exciting for me because I thought I was watching a movie. I didn't realize people were dying. To me, it was like, "Wow, this is so cool. There's a lot of fighting here. How exciting." That was another memory. There are a lot of others, but those are two key memories.

Then, my father was placed under house arrest because even though he worked for the government, he had expressed criticism of Fidel and Raúl and what was happening with the Cuban Revolution. So, he was on the list of people who were considered potential enemies of the government. After the attack, we went back to our home, and then the secret service came to arrest my father. Each block at that time, and that still is the case today, had a neighborhood watch called the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. Each committee was responsible for a block, and the person in charge of the committee was assigned to monitor behavior. If he felt something was wrong, he will give that name to the government. The guy liked my father very much. He was a very nice man. So, when the secret service came to arrest my father, who was not involved in anything, he was just criticizing the revolution, this man came and said to the secret service guys, "Don't take him. He's a good man. He has his opinions, but he's not going to do anything against the government." Then, the two G2 men, that's how they were known, said to him, "We're going to make you responsible for him. If he leaves the house, he will be arrested, and you will be arrested. He's under house arrest." My father was under house arrest from Saturday, April 15th to about Wednesday, April 19th, or Thursday, when the guy came and said, "You can now leave and go back to work." So, it wasn't torture or anything like that, but he was under that. That affected him a lot because from that moment on, he knew he was being watched and he felt that he could not be a free person, and that's when he decided, "I'm not going to fight. I'm not going to join any group that is sponsoring violence, so I have to leave." That's when he decided to leave Cuba.

CR: How did you all leave Cuba?

DF: We were given permission by the Cuban government. I'm not familiar with the process, it's very complicated, so I can't give you the details. All I know is that the Cuban government said, "You can leave." So, my father booked passage for us on an American flight, which would go from Havana to Miami. You have to get something from the U.S. I think it was called a waiver visa, and that was given to us. But then something happened. Our flight was scheduled for October 1962, which meant you got on the plane, you go to Miami, you're here, and then you begin life again. But October '62 was the missile crisis. That's when Kennedy discovered that there were nuclear warheads and missiles aimed at Florida, Washington D.C., and other parts of the South in the U.S. Kennedy, Khrushchev basically were going at it. The whole thing was shut down. Our flight was cancelled. Anyone else during that time, they lost their flights. We were not able to come. That meant that my father, who by now was known as an anti-Castro individual, he could not go back to work because once you declared your position against the government, you could not legally work. He could not go back to work, and people harassed him because he was anti-Castro. At one time, they threw eggs at him. I didn't have any of that, but he dealt with that. Our flight was canceled.

Then, the next two years, he had to go through hell because of what was happening to him because he did not support the revolution. Eventually, he did some paperwork and went to the Spanish embassy. They gave him asylum, so he was able to fly from Cuba to Spain. We were supposed to leave in '62. We left in '65 when the Spanish said, "Yes, fine, come." That's how we left.

CR: Did you live in Spain?

DF: We went to Spain, yes.

CR: How long, and what was that like?

DF: We were there almost a year. We flew into Madrid, but then my father had a very good friend, who had been in Cuba for many years, who was a Spaniard. He lived in Northern Spain in a town called Gijón, and we went to be with him. My father worked with him while we were there waiting for the papers to allow us to come to the U.S.

CR: When you were able to come to the U.S., where did you go?

DF: That's one of those stories that's probably very familiar because we thought we were going to New York City. No one had ever heard, in Cuba anyhow, of Union City. You knew Miami, you knew Hollywood, Los Angeles, New York City, but Union City? Plus, in Spanish, it sounds almost the same if you say it really fast, so we thought we were going to New York City. Instead, our cousins in Union City were waiting for us. So, that's what happened; we went to Union City on January 4, 1966. That was it. We were in Union City, and we lived there for a long while.

CR: Did you already have family living in Union City?

DF: Yes, my mother's cousins--again, I keep saying it gets complicated, but I'm sure all of your stories are complicated--my mother's cousins, there were three women, three cousins, and they always sort of managed to live together. It's like reading [Russian writer Anton] Chekhov. They always managed to live together.

One of them, her name is, or was, Laura. She married this guy from Spain who had gone to Cuba in the 1930s. He was a very successful warehouse person; that was his business in Cuba. He also represented RCA Victor, which is a recording company and a radio company in Cuba, so he did well. He was very comfortable. He was well-to-do.

In 1959, he had sent at least one, I think two, but definitely one of his kids, who's very close to me now, to New York City for Christmas. Then, the revolution happened. Fidel came into power January 1st, or Batista left January 1st and then the revolutionary government took over January 1st. Dionisio, this is the old guy who owned everything, told his son to stay here. Dionisio felt that there were going to be problems. He then sent his other kids, there were two others, two other sons, they came, and then two of the cousins came. They all came to New York City. They were staying at a hotel; then they took a cheaper hotel because they were running out of money. So, they were in New York City [in] January, February, March of 1959.

One of them found out--and I don't know who--that there was small, tiny Cuban community in Union City that came in 1952-'53, and that if you moved to Union City, the rents were lower than New York City. It was ten minutes away from Manhattan, so you could move to Union City, work in Manhattan. Union City had, at that time, a thriving embroidery industry, and there were a lot of factories in Weehawken, Hoboken, not Jersey City, but Weehawken, Hoboken, Secaucus. They had a lot of factories, and you could get jobs. They didn't speak English. What else were you going to do? Work in factories. Those cousins, the aunts and the cousins, then came to Union City pretty early, like in '60, and they settled in Union City.

When we left Cuba, they said, "Okay, you're going to come to Union City." What they did was--and they did this for a lot of people--the Cuban community, at that time, once they knew we were in Spain, they rented an apartment for us in Union City. They paid the rent for like three months. They got food. They bought food and they got furniture. Once we were given permission to come to the U.S., they were waiting for us.

My first children's book, the one that I wrote, I can show it to you later on, it's called *When This World Was New*, which is a modest bestseller. I get money from it. It's the story about my arrival in Union City and how my mother's cousins did this for us. They took me to school. They found my father a job, and they gave us a home with food and coats and everything else for a little while. That's how we came to Union City.

CR: Where did your parents work in the United States?

DF: My father, when he first arrived, those cousins got a job for him at a factory. We arrived January 4th. On January 5th, 1966, he went to work at the factory. My father had never done factory work because he always did office work and teaching. They got him a job, so he worked

there at the factory, which is gone, but it's a company called Sports Temp. In Spanish, they used to say Sport Tempo. It's called Sports Temp. I don't know what it means. He did two years working there. He didn't like it. He was not a factory person, but he needed to get settled here. He had to provide for us.

He then went to Wall Street. He knew people. He knew other Cubans who were working on Wall Street, entry levels, clerical jobs working for firms on Wall Street. My father thought, "This is what I can do." He took a day off, went into Wall Street, and met one of his friends, [who] took him to a company and my father got a job as a messenger for Wall Street. Of course, by now, as you know, everything is through Internet, but way [back then], there was no Internet, so if you have to deliver an important document from one company to another, you did it in person. You hired a messenger who would go and do it. So, my father did that for a while until he was able to get a position. I don't know what he did, but it was like working in the office.

Then, eventually, he made his way to become manager of the Latin American division of a company called Almac Shipping Company. All they did was paperwork. The ships would come in from Latin America, and in order for them to deliver the products to the U.S., papers had to be signed, so they would go to the company, like the one that my father worked for, they would go to the consulate. It would get signed and then you could unload, and then if you wanted to send stuff to each company, it was the same thing. He did that for many years.

Eventually, he said, "When I die, I don't want snow on my graveyard," so he moved to Miami, semi-retired, but he worked in Miami. He did work, different things, because he wasn't completely retired. When he died, that's what happened; he died in Miami and there is no snow on his graveyard today.

My mother had been a teacher in Cuba. My father picked up English, so he could do that. But my mother never did. She had been a teacher. She didn't really know how to do anything else. At that time, there was a pocketbook factory in Hoboken that hired a lot of Latinas to do whatever they did on a pocketbook. All I know is that my mother was in charge of examining the pocketbook or the purse to make sure that there were no mistakes with it. If there was something wrong, then you would send it back. She did that for many years until my father said, "We are going to Miami." Then, that was it. She stopped working. That's what she did. They never regained, or my father never regained, though he was not sorry, the status he had in Cuba. He was solid upper-middle class, and then we're down to, I don't know what we were down to, but it was not what he had before. He was okay with that. He had the ability to criticize the government, to feel free, which had ended when Fidel came to power, from his perspective. That's my story.

[TAPE PAUSED]

CR: We are back. What was it like living in Union City?

DF: Wow, you know, it's funny because so many years and I've talked to a lot of people, I've gone to conferences, the question never really comes up because it was kind of weird. It was okay, but it was weird. First thing, it was very cold because it was January. We had lived in

Gijón, Spain. It was cold in Gijón, but it wasn't dramatically cold. It was raining. We wore a sweater or a raincoat, but it was this whole thing with, it was twenty degrees, twenty-five degrees. It was very cold, so that was a peculiar thing.

Then, well, my first day in school, I'm sitting in the classroom. Even though I wrote a children's book about my first day here, I never really write about being in school. I'm sitting in this classroom, and I noticed that none of the kids are sneezing. I have asthma, so I sneeze all the time. I'm saying, "Americans don't sneeze. That's got to be like a Cuban thing when people sneeze. They don't do this in the U.S., so I don't want to sneeze." Every time I felt the urge to sneeze, "What do I do? What do I do?" I discovered one day that if I worked to breathe through my mouth and not my nose, I would not sneeze. That whole first day of school in the U.S., which was like January 5th, 1966, I walked around with my mouth open the whole time. I don't think anyone noticed, but if someone did, I wonder what they thought. Eventually, the following day, someone sneezed, and I said, "Oh, my goodness, they do sneeze, so I can sneeze." So, that was a weird process.

I felt disconnected. I had grown up in a community in Cuba, once I was growing up in Havana, that I mentioned early on, where I had my friends, where I knew everyone, and everyone knew me. We had the same sense, even though there was a revolution and you were not certain what was going to happen the next day, as far as the kids and the families, we were all sort of together, the same ideas, what to talk about, what we liked. In Spain, I didn't have that, but still.

When I got to Union City, I didn't know anyone, and I felt so dislocated and displaced. My parents immediately connected with a very active Cuban community at that time, this is 1966. Today, it would be a Latino community because Union City is so much more diverse, and it makes it a better city. At that time, it was basically Italian, Polish, Irish, and Cubans. There were very few African Americans in Union City, which is so hard to believe, at that time. So, I felt disconnected because I didn't speak English. I didn't really belong to that group. At the same time, the kids that I was meeting were not like the kids I knew. My father was very involved in all kinds of civic activities connected with the Cuban community. So, I did a lot of things with him, but I felt lonely and out of contact. You know, I wanted a girlfriend because I was fourteen years old. It wasn't easy to do that. Then, remember that we got here in January, so in January and February, it's pitch dark at four-thirty. I grew up in a country where it was not dark until seven or eight, so it was like, "Wow, this is so weird. It's so dark and so cold." So, I didn't realize then, but I now know that it was very traumatic for me.

I was supposed to go into high school, but the cousin, the older cousin, who registered me, put me in the seventh grade. It was fine. It didn't do anything to me as far as I can tell, but I didn't have connection with those kids. For many years actually, I was trying to figure out, "Well, how do I make friends and who are the friends?" I met some Cuban kids, but they were not like me. You know, I was a wussy guy, if you want to use that language. I was a guy who read a lot and watched a lot of films. I loved the arts. I loved going to museums. I wasn't strong. I limped. For those two years, I was just like, "Where am I and where do I belong?" I know that shaped me in the U.S. because I realize that in many ways I am that other, the other person who doesn't fully belong anywhere. I think that came in those two years. It wasn't the same for everyone, so my story probably stands alone. I don't want to generalize. I think, when I look back now, I was

unhappy, and I didn't know that. I was missing what I knew from the neighborhood where I grew up in Cuba, the belonging and wanting to be part of a group. It was okay. I was not aware of racism at that time. Later on, I was, but not at that point because I was dealing with so much with what I was doing. Then, at the same time, I'm within a Cuban enclave. They were old people, and they were all talking about getting rid of Fidel and invading Cuba and bringing democracy to the island and I didn't really care. All I wanted was a girlfriend, really. I really couldn't find one because also the way that I was. I was not conscious of that time and I don't want to say that I was extremely unhappy, but I wasn't [happy].

My father was trying to rebuild what he had done in Cuba. It just didn't happen; that was not possible. Sometimes, it's forgotten of that generation, those are the Cubans who left in '59 to '66, they were never able to get what they had before. You can criticize them and say they were right wing or for Batista or not for the people. It doesn't matter. You can summarize it that way, but it's cost many of them. They lost a lot, and they never got it back. My father didn't. My father never got it back, but he was okay with that. He was a happy fellow. You know, he didn't complain about that.

High school was different because I connected. It's amazing. I had a lot of friends, but I was friends with Cubans like Bob Menendez, Senator Bob Menendez. We went to high school together, so he was a friend. There was a writer who died very young named Roger Hernandez, who was a journalist. He died very young. I connected with him. There was a guy who is now a successful real estate person down the shore, Atlantic City, and I became his friend. There was another guy who wanted to be a movie star. He died very young. He was gay, and he caught AIDS during that first wave, so he was one of those casualties. There was another guy who wanted to be a star also, a Broadway star. He also died of AIDS, during that year 1984-'85. I became friends with them. I dated American girls because I wanted to become Americanized and I thought that would be the way to go. I was not dating Cuban girls; I was dating American girls, so it was part of my process. I thought that in order to make it here I needed to be American, and one way to do was to go out with American girls, which is okay. I didn't mind. I liked them, and some of them liked me.

It was those two years, I realize now, were very difficult. It was a good thing that I didn't know it at that time, how difficult it was to go through that assimilation process. I will tell you that there are some people that I know from that era who didn't go through the process. If you meet them today, fifty or sixty years later, they're still the same. They're still as Cuban as they were in 1966, and I know I'm not. I'm not that Cuban. I'm a Cuban American and American Cuban, whatever you want to call it, but I'm a lot more American than Cuban.

TM: What types of restaurants do you remember going to in Union City?

DF: There was a famous place called Broadway Sandwich. They didn't do sandwiches. They did everything else, but every Cuban in town went to that restaurant. You would go there to see friends. They had two restaurants, and that's the restaurant I went to. I went with my family. I went with my friends. Then, many years later, I took my daughter there. It was still called Broadway Sandwich, but it wasn't the same. I was so heartbroken because I wanted her to have the experience of a Cuban restaurant. By that time, it had become something else, but had the

same name. That was it. Broadway Sandwich immediately comes to mind, and I have good memories of it.

TM: Where did you go shopping?

DF: Like for what, food or clothes?

TM: For food or clothes or really anything in Union City.

DF: Well, Union City and West New York, right next to Union City, and Guttenberg, which is also next to West New York and then North Bergen--it might not still be the case, but I think it is--the longest main street in the United States, it's in those towns. It goes from 8th Street all the way to 82nd Street, packed with stores. Even today, when you walk there, it's amazing, and I go there often. When you're walking today, when you're hanging out on Bergenline Avenue, that's the name of that main street, you have Colombians, Nicaraguans, Guatemalans, Peruvians, Salvadorans, Mexicans, Argentines, Chileans. It today is an incredible echo of the Latin American experience in the U.S. and a representation of Latin Americanness.

At that time, it was basically Cuban. Well, there were Greek diners and Italian businesses, but most of the businesses were owned by Cubans, and the restaurants, except for the supermarkets. The supermarkets were owned by Italians, and then they were the A&P, what we used to call A&P, and ShopRite. There was a woman named Marina from the Dominican Republic, who was very close to my mother's cousins, the ones who got us to Union City, and at least for a couple of years, because my father didn't have car--it took a while for him to get a car and Marina had, I think it was, a Chrysler, one of those super long cars--she would pick up my mother and the cousins Friday nights and go to this huge supermarket on Tonnelle Avenue in that area, and my mother would shop there for the week. For the little things that you needed, she would send me to the bodega, which was two blocks away. The guy had a little notebook and I would go in a buy stuff and then he would put in the notebook what I bought. Then, a week later, my mother would come and pay him because they didn't give me any money, and that was sort of a credit card system. It was a little notebook, write down the name of the person and what they bought, so that's how we did it. For clothes, we went to Cuban-owned shops. My father knew a lot of those people from Cuba, so it was very easy to go and buy pants et cetera. There were some major stores. Sears was there. It went bankrupt, and I seldom got stuff from Sears. That was a place where initially you had to have a little more money because they didn't know you, so you had to pay cash. Eventually, my father got a credit card, so all of that went away, which was probably true for most people at that time. I'm talking '66 to '69 to '71, those are the years that I'm thinking about.

CR: What streets did you live on? Do you remember the street names?

DF: Yes. It's still there. We first went to 38th Street in Union City.

CR: What was the cross street?

DF: Kennedy Boulevard and Bergenline Avenue. Our cousins had rented a basement apartment for us. We recently went to it--well, about two years ago with my daughter and my wife and one of the cousins and some of his friends--not to the apartment, but just to see that area. So, the building is still there, and the basement apartment is still there. That's where we went. That was kind of weird moving to a basement. I didn't know there were such things, but I thought it was exciting and I was okay with that. From there, we still remained on the same street, but we moved to a building. We moved to the second floor, so it wasn't below the ground. My parents were there for a while, then they moved to Kennedy Boulevard, which was supposed to be a step higher, I guess, into a real apartment, and then to Florida. That's more or less it. Yes, I remember those apartments. I was like, "Wow, this is kind of a different experience for me."

CR: What was it like attending Union Hill High School?

DF: I was supposed to go into high school, but I didn't. I went two years later, which meant I was older than the freshman class, at least a year older, probably two. It was great. I loved Union Hill High School. I had a great experience. By that time, I felt comfortable in Union City. I had many different friends. Then, I met those guys that I really liked. You know it might not look that way today--I'm going to be sixty-seven years old--but I was kind of cute. Some girls liked me, and that made me happy. I had a lot of friends. I was in the drama club. I was in the history club. I was very much involved in activities. I felt it was a very welcoming environment, but there were moments that today I realize were what you might call racism.

I had a very thick accent. I still have an accent, but over the years it's not as thick unless it's ten o' clock at night. At that time, in high school, I had a very thick accent. However, I read a lot because I had come from a family that reads. I read everything. I was constantly reading, and I wrote fairly well. Probably my syntax was awkward sometimes. The diction may be awkward. It was just part of the process of learning another language and of learning how to write. I'm very sensitive to writing. I made English honors in my junior year, so I was put in English honors. I remember the teacher saying to me the first day of class, "Are you in the right class?" She didn't ask that of anyone else. Most of the students were not Latinos. They were Irish, Polish, Italian. She didn't ask anyone of them. She asked me, "Are you sure you're in the right class?" I remember that because I like reading and I can talk and I can figure what's going on when we talk about literature and I love literature. That's what I teach. I teach literature and about literature, and my graduate degree, one of them, is in comparative literature. It was natural for me. So, "Are you sure?" That was one instance. That was probably the first time I experienced that type of--I don't want to say bigotry. I don't think she was bigoted, but her reaction was, you know, "Here's this kid with a thick accent. Why is he in my class?" So, I can understand her perspective. I'm not blaming her, but I felt like, "Wow, this is so weird that somebody's asking me this." It was one of the first times, but otherwise I usually felt welcomed.

A lot of it I didn't know the undertones, the subtext. When someone is discriminating against someone else, it's not always so obvious. There's historical circumstances, a tradition, a psychological component, what's being said or not said. I didn't know that. I still don't even know today. Sometimes I'm aware, but sometimes I'm not. I had a great time in high school. I enjoyed it. It was a good experience for me. I met many people I liked and many teachers that I remember from that.

CR: What was it like going through the citizenship process?

DF: That was so peculiar. My father wanted to become a citizen as soon as possible. My mother always supported him, so she wanted to do that. Part of the reasoning for him to become a citizen was this is a new world, a new experience, and he was going to be a part of that world. It was also a way for him to fight against Fidel, whom he considered a dictator. He didn't know how else to fight, this was an opportunity to do so, and then to be thankful that we were allowed to come here, knowing that that's not always possible. We know that today because of what's going on, without getting into much of that. I think about it. It wasn't important to me. I was having fun in high school. I was in college. I wanted to travel. I wanted to write, so I didn't think about it. One day, one of the guys working with Bob Menendez--Senator Menendez, who at that time was on the Board of Ed in Union City, he was not mayor yet, and working very much with the politics--his aide, his name is Abraham, "Abe," from the Dominican Republic, said, "Are you a citizen yet?" I said, "No." "Well, what are you waiting for?" So, he took me to his office, filled out the paper, and I did it and that was it. I became a citizen. There was no agony for me. I did it, and my friend Abe said, "Bob Menendez, whom I admire very much, felt that I should do it, so I did it." It was not a process. It was not a moment of liberation. It was not a moment of rejecting my Cuban experience. It was just something that I did, and I'm glad I did it. I'm very proud of being a citizen, and I love being in the [United States]. This is home. This is who I am now. I do tell my students that while I am at home in the U.S., it's not home. There're two different perspectives. I'm never going back to home in Cuba before 1965, so that's gone.

CR: Do you think that most Cubans in Union City had a strong anti-Castro sentiment when you were there?

DF: They do. They did, and they still do. That is one united position that puts all of us Cubans--Cubans who are Democrats, but most Cubans are Republicans--where we come together is in the anti-Castro position that we have. That's where Senator Menendez stands.

TM: Where there any other prominent ethnic groups in Union City at the time?

DF: I was in Union City from 1966 to 1983. From 1966 to about 1980, it was basically fifty percent Cuban and then Italian, Irish, Polish. It's surprising today as I look back how few African Americans were in Union City at that time. In the '50s, there had been a Puerto Rican community, but they relocated to Hoboken for a while and then Jersey City. I don't know why, but that's what had happened. When my family arrived in Union City, there were very few Puerto Ricans. I met them in high school, but there were very, very few. In ‘81-‘82, when U.S. immigration laws opened up and were kinder and more understanding of other countries, then at that time I saw an Indian population, Hindus moved to Union City, set up magazine businesses. It's still a handful, not a lot. My experience of Union City is half Cuban at that time and then everything else.

CR: Did you have any conflicts with your Anglo neighbors ever?

DF: No, I didn't, except when that teacher said that. It was later and not in Union City, and part of it was because I didn't understand the complexities of what's going on, I didn't feel any racist behavior towards me. I'm sure it was there, but I didn't feel it. I went out with what I used to call American girls. I was friends with Americans and visited their homes. I had some of them come and eat Cuban food with me, so I did not feel that antagonism. It was fine. It was comfortable. I walked around all over the place in Union City. I had friends who were not Cubans, but the closest friends that I had turned out to be Cubans. I don't have an explanation for that; it was just the way that it worked. The girls that I dated were not Cubans, so that's just what was happening.

It was much later that I was surprised--I was at Montclair State University. One of my close friends was Cuban, and he needed a ride home. Something had happened to his car. He knew this girl and the girl said that her father will give him a ride home, but for him not to tell her that he was Cuban because otherwise he would just push him out the car. I was shocked with that. That was one of those first few times where I encountered, from a personal perspective, that. I felt that at that time the community, the Italian, the Polish, the Irish communities were very welcoming of Cubans. You also have to give a perspective because a lot of U.S. racism is based on skin pigmentation rather than heritage and the complexities of that. [Of] most of the Cubans that moved to Union City during that time, I was probably one of the darkest. Most of them were fair skinned, you know, blonde hair, or dark hair but light skin. To the Italian community, it felt as if they were welcoming people from Southern Italy, so they were taken in. I was. I mean, I had so many Italian families that liked me and had me over to eat with them. Again, these are realities that I look at, from my perspective now, understanding much more about racism than I did back then. My father, one time I said to my dad, "Americans are prejudiced against Cubans," and he said, "How could that be? That's just not possible. We're so good. Why would anyone be against us?" That was his perspective, so he never accepted the idea, even to the day he died, that there was racism in the U.S. He didn't accept that. So, there was a process of becoming aware of that. I felt it much more later and I feel it now, but I didn't feel it then.

TM: Did you attend any community events in Union City?

DF: Oh, lots of them, hundreds of them. There were Cuban American community events. Because I had so many friends who were Italian, there were Italian events, Catholic Church events, school events. Yes, I'm sociable, so you could go and meet people. I was okay doing that, so I did that a lot of that. The Catholic Church had a lot of activities going on for everyone, not just for Cubans, and I went to many of those. They were nice. They were nice. Then, also, I was interested in theater and literature, and there were theatrical groups and I went to those meetings and I was always welcomed.

CR: You mentioned that you were in a political group in Union City. How did you get involved in that, and what was it?

DF: Well, Senator Menendez and I are friends. We were about a year or two apart, and he got involved pretty early in the political scene. He ran for the Board of Ed and became the president--I think he still is the youngest president of a Board of Education in the U.S. ever.

Then, he became mayor, eventually an assemblyman in New Jersey and then New Jersey congressman and then senator. During the years from the Board of Ed to the year he became the mayor, during that time in between, he was very much involved with the mayor in Union City, a guy named William V. Musto. There was a group called something like Young Democrats, and Bob was in the group. I liked Bob, so I was in the group. I did things for the group. I went to the meetings. When the group decided to support candidate Jimmy Carter, Bob Menendez asked me to write the platform for the group, which I did. I wrote it. No claim to glory, I just was in my bed in my apartment writing it. I was involved with them; I was involved with the local activities of that group, essentially because of Bob more than politics. I wasn't thinking about the political agenda. He was just a nice guy. I like him; I still do. I just saw him last week. [Editor's Note: William V. Musto served as the mayor of Union City from 1962 to 1970 and from 1974 to 1982. In 1974, Bob Menendez was elected to Union City School District's Board of Education at the age of twenty. From 1986 to 1992, Menendez served as the mayor of Union City, during which time he was elected to represent New Jersey's 33rd District in the General Assembly. In March 1991, he was elected to the New Jersey State Senate in a special election. From 1993 to 2006, Menendez served in the U.S. House of Representatives from New Jersey's 13th District. In January 2006, he was appointed to fill a U.S. Senate seat from New Jersey and was elected to a full six-year term in November. He was reelected in 2012 and 2018.]

CR: Was it difficult having a different political affiliation than your parents?

DF: Well, most of the older Cubans were and are Republicans. Historically, it's based on their interpretation of the U.S. and the Cuban Revolution. They feel that the Democratic Party neglected the anti-Castro Cuban position and betrayed them. It goes back to the Bay of Pigs, which we have talked about early on. The Bay of Pigs invasion developed under President Eisenhower and then presidential candidate Nixon, and then it was inherited by John F. Kennedy. The Republicans wanted to remove Fidel. The Democrats wanted to but not as much as the Republicans wanted to. The plan was for 1,560 Cuban soldiers--it's a little more than that, but that's essentially the figure reported in most historical accounts--the premise was they will land, and then the US Air Force will come and protect their circle, the beachhead, by attacking Castro's forces, stopping them from attacking those soldiers, and then defeating the Cuban air force. On April 17th, they landed. On April 19th, Kennedy said, "We're not sending reinforcements. They're left alone. We're not going to do anything." So, the Cubans felt betrayed by Kennedy and the Democrats. From that point on, which is still the case today, Cuban Americans sided with the Republicans. My dad was a Republican. My mother was a Republican because my dad was. My father-in-law was a Republican. On and off, I've been a Republican and a Democrat because I'm looking at all the issues. When I was working with Bob for Jimmy Carter, my father was always very cool. He never really objected to whatever I was doing, but if I were to say to his friends, "I'm writing this platform for Jimmy Carter. I'm going to vote for Jimmy Carter," they would have been very upset. Even today, when we go to Miami, I don't talk about politics because if I tell them that I'm a Democrat, those older Cubans will say, "You are betraying me." That's essentially the conflict. In Union City, it was a peculiar thing because my cousin, the one who got the apartment for us, who's a Republican, he is extremely loyal to Bob Menendez and has given Senator Menendez money to support his campaign. For him, what is important is the friendship with Senator Menendez and not the ideology. You have that conflict of friendship, family and then the ideology. I navigated those waters. Essentially,

my wife and I avoid politics with the relatives that we have, which are not that many because they're all dying.

TM: We are going to move on to college. Why did you choose to go to college and pursue a degree in Latin American history and literature?

DF: Well, my bachelor's degree is actually in English because I love books and I love literature. I spoke Spanish, which I still do, and I'm used to Spanish literature. I felt when I got to college, if I were to major Spanish, what's the point? You know, it's like kissing your cousin. I decided I'm going to do English, so I majored in English at Montclair State University. I went to Montclair State University because everyone in Union City went either to Saint Peter's University or Montclair State. I went to Montclair State. I majored in English and literature. I mean, it's what I do. I write. I try to write. All of my friends are writers. Some are famous, some are not, but all of my friends are writers. That's just what's in my blood, the arts. My son is an artist; my daughter's a filmmaker. That's what I like. I wish my son were like a vice president for a bank and my daughter were also an accountant, so they could make money, but, no, it's what's in my blood. So, I went to Montclair State, and I majored in English lit and religion. I did that for four years.

In the meantime, I'm still in love with Latin American literature. People would often ask me, "What do you think of this writer from Latin America?" I felt, "I have to know this. People are asking me. I should know more than just talk about Ernest Hemingway, Fitzgerald, William Shakespeare, Matthew Arnold. I need know more than that." When I graduated from Montclair State, the first graduate degree I got was in library science at Rutgers. I went to library school there. Then, for the second degree, I wanted to do comparative literature, and I decided, "Well, I'm going to do Latin America." My second graduate degree is in comparative literature, concentrated in Caribbean literature and Latin America. [Editor's Note: D.H. Figueredo earned a M.L.S. at Rutgers University in 1978 and M.A. at New York University in 1989.]

I just love books. My father did. My father knew a lot of writers, so I grew up meeting writers. My uncle's a writer. That was what I liked, so it doesn't feel like work. It's just who I am. Literature, film and the arts, that's what I love, so that's why I did it. There's another factor. At that time, I was hired as the Latin American curator at the New York Public Library, the research library, on 42nd Street. They paid for me to get my second master's, so I was like, "Oh, I can do that." I did it. That's how it worked.

CR: Was your first master's your Master's of Library Science at Rutgers?

DF: Yes, my first master's. When I finished my B.A. in English ages ago, there were no jobs available. The U.S. was going through an incredible economic crisis, which by now we have forgotten. We had not seen anything like that before. There were no jobs. Students were graduating with a teaching degree and there were no teaching jobs. If you wanted to teach at a university, you have to have a Ph.D. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do literature. I didn't want to do anything else, so I got a job at the Union City Public Library. I was working at the library as a clerk or an assistant. Then, the New Jersey Library Association was offering scholarships to people who were working in libraries. I thought, "You know, I like being with

books, hanging out with books. I'm not ready to teach." At that moment, I didn't want to teach. I said, "I don't want to be a banker. I don't want to work on Wall Street." I did work two summers on Wall Street, and I hated that. "What am I going to do? Books are my thing." I applied to Rutgers. I had good grades, so they accepted me. Then, I got that scholarship, so my first degree was in library science and then I worked in libraries forever, until I retired.

CR: What was it like attending Rutgers in 1978?

DF: It was great. I had brilliant professors in librarianship and informationship and understanding humanities, which matters to me, and understanding film. It was an incredible experience. Quite frankly, when I went to Montclair State University, I could've gone other places. Rutgers is much more closer to me emotionally than the other schools, so I loved to be there. Essentially, I never left. I graduated. My kids went there. My wife was Director of Admissions for Rutgers for many years. I think of myself as a Rutgers person. So many of my friends are Rutgers-affiliated people. It was a great experience. It was wonderful. That was my career. That's what I did for many years.

TM: Were there a lot of Latinos at Rutgers when you were there?

DF: No, I think there were two: me and this other guy, who was also Cuban, who's at Montclair State University, and actually not even African Americans. I don't know why. See, let me put it differently, not to say something about Rutgers. When I decided to go to library school, my father said, "You're going for the skinny cows." So, the expression was the fat cows are those jobs that give you money and you live comfortably. The skinny cows are the cows that don't give you anything, so librarianship was one of those, which is partially true, not completely so, but partially true. If you are coming from Union City or Paterson or Newark and you're a Latino, your parents want you to do something else that's going to make money: law, science, business. Library school, what are you going to be, a librarian? They don't make much money. I think that was part of what was going on at that point. After I graduated Rutgers, I did a program to recruit Latino students for a little while. I think that went on for about two or three years and I was involved with that project and then I did other things, so I don't know what they are doing now. When I was there, I think there were just two, this guy named Eduardo Gil, and me. That was it.

CR: Were you aware of any student political organizations at Rutgers when you were there?

DF: I was working at the library full time and I was going to grad school full time, so I didn't have time to think about that. I'm sure there were, but I was not involved with those.

CR: How was it working as a librarian in Union City?

DF: Well, it was fun. I mean, I was dealing with books. I got to know the community. I worked at the Union City Public Library from the fall of 1974 to the fall of 1978, but I was not a librarian. I was a library page. For one year, I was a librarian. I was hired, when I graduated from Rutgers, they hired me for one year. I met a lot of people and talked with them. I was able to buy a lot of books in Spanish, so it was a nice experience. I knew it was a very small world,

and I wanted more intellectual growth, not to sound pretentious, but I wanted more of a challenge. When the Newark Public Library opportunity came, I was ready for that. It was a nice time. I'm glad I did it. Again, Bob Menendez was a rising star. I met many people there that were very pleasant. I was happy to be with them.

TM: What did your duties entail at the Union City Library?

DF: I actually began to manage the branch. There are two. There's the main library, which is bigger, and then there's a smaller library, so I was in charge of the smaller library. That meant making sure that people came to work and that we bought books and that we provided services and programs to children, and people could take books out and whatever. Then, I was also running a lot of the cultural programs, which was something that I liked. Once a week, I would show a film and give a lecture about the film. Then, once a month, I would invite someone to come and speak about whatever. Senator Bob Menendez was one of those who came and talked about different activities that the city was doing. Those were my tasks. They were fun. It never really felt like work. I was doing this, and I was glad to do it. They didn't pay a whole lot, but that was okay at that point. Later on, then I started getting more money, but, initially, yes. A lot of the people that I knew who had graduated with me from Montclair State, I got them jobs at that time. It was a very difficult time, so I was very fortunate I was able to work.

CR: What about the Newark Public Library? What did you do there?

DF: At the Newark Public Library, I was Director of the Bilingual Program, and I also coordinated the Romance language literature collection. That was exciting. The Newark Public Library is the largest public library in New Jersey and one of the largest in the country, so it was wonderful. I met incredible people, a lot of professors from Rutgers University, a lot of bright students. So, it was very stimulating position. Then, working with the development program, we created a program, a system, that still exists today. It has a different name today, but I was able to lay the foundation for it. One of the things that we did was I would buy books in Spanish that would be sent to any library in New Jersey that wanted to borrow books in Spanish for three months to give to the Spanish readers. So, I was buying books in Spanish for the whole state, and that was very exciting. I did a lot of programs, invited a lot of famous people there, and I learned so much. I learned so much at that library, still have friends there.

Then, from there, I went to the New York Public Library, the research library, which is heaven for librarians, as a Latin American curator. At the Newark Public Library, I was doing more practical things like getting books about cooking and health for Spanish-speaking readers. At the New York Public Library, it was building an academic, intellectual and scholarly foundation for research in Latin America. That was a different approach, which I also loved. I think today if I have any intellectual caliber to my work and my writing, it comes from my years at the New York Public Library.

CR: You wrote a lot of books about the Latino experience. What made you want to pursue that topic in your writing?

DF: That's a good question. For those of you--I presume you guys are heading in that direction one way or another--if you want to be a writer and you want to write something that's meaningful to you, because if it's not meaningful to you, no one else is going to read it, you have to write about what you know. Even though I was an English major and I socialize with people who are not Latinos even today, the Latino experience is the fundamental core of who I am. Then, knowing the contributions of Latino culture to U.S. history, but how it is forgotten--for whatever reasons, it is neglected, it is forgotten--I just felt that this was an opportunity for me to at least share that knowledge with a few people, that part of the U.S. history includes the foundations, the platform, the seeds that the Latino experience gave to the U.S. five hundred years ago, which has been dismissed, maybe not so much anymore, but I'm not saying that because of what's going on today in politics. So, that attracted me. It was natural. I knew the subject. It's important. It's appealing to me, and I feel that I can make a small contribution to scholarship. Also, I think I'm not approaching it from militant position. There are writers who address the same topic with this more of a fighting attitude. Mine is more of an academic, literary approach. So, for example, rather than spend important time discussing oppression, which I do, I'd rather talk about the fact that the first book written about the U.S. was written in Spanish in the 16th century by a Spaniard explorer. Most students in high school don't know that, and most history teachers don't even know that or talk about it. That's why I felt, "I've got to do this." This is a good moment for me to share this because there's no anger from me. This is just a beautiful reality that I want to share with other people, so that's what I've done. I love doing it, so it's not painful. That's why it happened. [Editor's Note: Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566) was a Spanish colonist, landowner, priest and writer whose numerous works include *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias,* or *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, which was written in 1542 and published in Spain in 1552.]

CR: You also write a lot of children's books. Why did you want to do that?

DF: Well, I have five published children's books, but I've written twenty of them. The other maybe are not that good, so they haven't been published. I love children's literature. It's the way to get to the heart of a person, and what you do to that heart will shape the future of that person and a good chunk of the future of the world. That's why I've written five children's books. They're all personal. I don't write about animals or fantasy. I write about my parents in my children's books, one way or the other are connected with that experience. Children's literature is so easily dismissed, once you are a child and don't read it and once the parents have all the kids that don't read it; you're missing incredible poetry and the precision of language that goes into a well-written book for a child. That's a challenge for me, so I like doing it. It's like writing poetry because I'm a bad poet and I cannot write poetry, but I can attempt writing children's literature. That's why I do that.

CR: You mentioned that you were friends with some famous Cuban writers. Can you tell me about those relationships?

DF: Well, it's united first because of love of literature. That's the dominant feature. Then, because we're Cubans, so we share an experience. Regardless of political affiliations, we share the experience of losing a home. See, for me and my generation--my Cuban generation, I'm going to frame it from 1959 to ‘66, you could probably push it to 1970--that generation left Cuba

not because of the need for money but to look for a better future somewhere else because of political oppression. That generation sees itself not as an immigrant but as an exile. There's not that much of difference, but psychologically it has some meaning to those who say, "I'm an exile" rather than an immigrant. To describe it further, my father had everything he wanted in Cuba. He lost it and what he got here was fine, but it's not what he had before. That's part of the nature of the exile.

Those writers that have become my friends, we are united because we love literature and then we have the exile experience. We share those values and then the sense of humor that goes with it, the appreciation of the arts that goes with that. Most of them are professors, so we also have that in common. Some of them, there's a guy--to give you just some hint--there's a guy in California named Alex Abella, he wrote one the best crime thriller novels, called *The Killing of the Saints*. We became friends. Another one is very dear, his name is Gustavo Pérez Firmat, who is a poet, and he teaches at Columbia University. He's in the American Poetry Society. He's a brilliant poet. He's written about American popular culture. We have become friends. There are others, but those are the two that come to mind immediately. There's one more who was at Rutgers, and then he left, who's a historian. His name is Luis Martínez-Fernández. He writes about Caribbean history, Puerto Rican history and Cuban history, and we shared those values. I don't want to make it sound so cerebral. It's just that when we get together, we have so much fun. We drink rum and Coke and it's fun and we listen to mambo and salsa. It's just great to know them.

TM: Was it difficult maintaining a relationship with Cubans back home when the U.S. had strained, hostile relations with Cuba?

DF: I don't really have relationships with anyone in Cuba. Okay, let me just make it wider. My father left. He was the first one to leave, and then all of his siblings followed. His stepfather stayed in Cuba, but we didn't really stay in touch with him. My mother's siblings, they all came, so it was the same thing. Now, my wife, her dad was the only one to leave. Everyone else supported and is in support of the Cuban Revolution. When I answered your question referring to my wife and to her dad, my father-in-law, they did not talk to each other for decades. It was only when they got to their eighties that they were able to talk to each other because they were old, and there were siblings. So, from that perspective, yes, it's extremely difficult to keep that going. From my perspective, no, because everyone came, so there was no one for me. Even today, the day I go back to Cuba, I don't have anyone there. I will go back for my children and maybe for nostalgia, but I don't have any living relatives in Cuba. That's not the case for my wife, but I cannot speak for her. She will go back and probably connect with those cousins. Knowing that part of me, the friends that my father had, it was extremely difficult to keep. Those who supported the Cuban Revolution regarded those who left as worms, which was the language that Fidel used, "You are a worm." It's very difficult to have a conversation if someone is calling you an insect. How do you have that conversation? That's the general perspective. It was easy for me. I don't have anyone there, so I don't have to think about it.

I did make a commitment to my dad. He had asked me not to go back to Cuba as long as the Castro brothers were in power, and I honored that request. For years, I said I'm not going back. Now, the brothers are gone. There's a different person in power. Is it the same system? Maybe, I don't know, but I would probably go back in the next two or three years because Fidel and Raúl

are no longer in power. That's the commitment to my dad and to me, and I will go probably because of my kids more than anything else. I will tell you this. I am not going back to my house or my neighborhood. I don't want to see it.

CR: Can you tell me about how you met your wife?

DF: Oh, she's so beautiful. [laughter] We met--we were talking about it recently--we met at Montclair State University. We went out a few times. At that time, I had grown up in a Cuban community in Union City, so I didn't really want to do stuff with Cubans. I wanted to be with Americans. I wanted to go out with American girls. She had grown up in a community where there were no Cubans, so she was discovering her Cubanhood. She was interested in Cubans. So, we didn't click. We had different things in mind, so we parted. She went her way, and I did my thing.

Then, ten years later, I was at a conference with the guy who went to library school with me, this Cuban guy, Eduardo Gil. We were at a conference. The doors open, and it's like *West Side Story*. This woman walks in, and my heart stopped. That was my wife. I saw her, and I said, "Wow, I don't want to be alive without this woman." So, I convinced her that I was a nice guy, and she went out with me. Of course, we both are Cubans. Maybe that was important, maybe not, but just when I saw her, I said, "This is the woman that I want in my life." She comes from a very prominent Cuban family. Her grandfather was an ambassador. Her uncle is a major filmmaker. Well, he just died three years ago, but he was a major filmmaker in Cuba. She comes from a really solid, well-known family in Cuba, even today, all for the government. That's how we met. We connected ten years later at a literature conference.

CR: We are going to switch gears to ask some reflective questions.

DF: Sure.

CR: What do you think makes Union City so attractive to Latinos today?

DF: It's a beautiful city. It's packed. There's no parking ever. You drive there, it's a havoc. You walk that main street, Bergenline Avenue, my goodness, any time of day, there are hundreds of people there. There's a welcoming sense for Latinos. You know, it might not be your nation, but you hear people talking in Spanish in the stores, and it's Ecuadorians and Colombians and Uruguayans. You hear that language, that Spanish language. I don't want to speak for all the people from the Caribbean because I can't say what the experience is like, but you don't feel threatened in Union City. It is a welcoming zone. It is so convenient because you get on a bus, and you are in Manhattan in ten minutes. I don't know about the rents. That has changed. Prices have gone up. Now, people from Manhattan are moving to Union City and Weehawken, West New York and Hoboken, so I don't know about that anymore. There was a moment where it was very easy to pay rent in Union City and to have a job in Manhattan. That attracted the community. Police officers speak Spanish. Many of them are Latinos. Government officials in Union City are Latinos, so there's that welcoming sense. I just love walking there because you can buy anything you want to eat, empanadas, pastelitos, whatever, it's there and it's very reasonable. I think that's a factor in the attraction, but it's the enclave. Relatives have come in

from a different country, and they come and it's affordable. Even with the rents going up, which I've seen, it's still fairly affordable.

TM: What do you think of the city's politics? Did you pay any attention to mayoral or state races?

DF: Not in the last few years. I have stayed pretty much focused on Bob Menendez because he's a friend, and of course, as a senator, he has to bring statewide and then national politics. His perspective is that of inclusiveness; everyone belongs here. I applaud that, and that's what I believe in. I think Union City behavior suggests that. I don't think there will be a politician ever elected to an office in Union City opposing that view. I cannot give you the details because I haven't been following it as much, as I'm looking more to what's going on with my writing and what's going on here.

CR: You hinted at the prices going up in Union City recently. Are you worried about redevelopment changing the city from what you grew up with?

DF: It will probably happen. There are historically, biographically--if you think of a city as a biography, as a birth and then maturity and death and rebirth--Union City had died in 1959 and then the Cubans revived it and have kept it going since then. It's not dying now, but does that mean that gentrification will change it? I don't know enough about those social aspects to say that that would be the case. If it does happen, it will indicate the removal of people who cannot afford those prices. Then, where are they going to go? As you get out of the county, where do you move to? What happens? I'm hoping that both can be together. They were areas, not just in Union City, but in Weehawken, West New York, Guttenberg, they were on the river edge, there was wasteland when I was there, complete wasteland, almost out of a science fiction movie. Those areas are now affluent townhouses and condominiums, which I think has revived the economy in Hudson County, suggesting the possibility to live together. But in anything like this, there are losers. I think if there are going to be losers, they are probably going to be Latinos. I don't know where they could go. I feel for them, but I don't know what I can do for them.

CR: Why do you think the Cuban population has decreased recently in Union City?

DF: The first generation that moved to Union City, they didn't really want to be in Union City. It was the place to go. They wanted to be as near to Cuba as possible, and that was Miami. Once they were able to settle in Union City and work for a while and it was time to retire, they left Union City, like my parents. As soon as my father could, he didn't want to be in Union City. He wanted to be near Cuba. He and his friends and thousands of his friends--well, he didn't have a thousand friends--but thousands of his peers moved to Miami just to be near Cuba. That was the first move. Then, the second generation, which would be me, I was looking for more open space and not crowded. You know, I just wanted to be able to park the car and not worry about parking and a little more quiet. Plus, I had my own sense of what does it mean to be successful in the U.S., so I left Union City and another generation feels the same way. So, I think the decline in the Cuban population in Union City has to do with the fact that the new Cubans, those who are arriving in the last fifteen years--they're not new, but I'm just going to call them that to make a difference--are more interested in Florida than anywhere else, so they're not going to

come here. Established Cubans in Union City who are old, they're dying or relocating somewhere else. Those who are my age have already left, (and the ones who stayed in surrounding areas like this?).

If you look at my kids, while my son is very interested in the Cuban American experience, Union City has no meaning for him. As an artist, he wants to be in New York City. My daughter's a filmmaker. She wants to be all over the world, not in Union City. So, the decline, I think, from my perspective, has to do with the different cultural ways of looking at your own growth and economically where you are. Maybe for some of them, Union City is not an affluent setting; therefore, they don't want to be there. I don't know that for a fact; I'm just guessing. It was an entry point. Historically, the tradition of any area in the U.S. that's an entry point, sooner or later it goes outward and outward to other places. Then, the entry point ceases to be [for] that generation. Right now, Union City is an entry point for Latinos from many other places but not for Cubans. I think it's just a natural process of growth as I see it. I'm not an expert on demographics. I'm just responding to what I think happens. If you are a Cuban American in New Jersey and you left Union City, at least once a year you go back. I do that all the time. More than once a year, I go back. So, there's that outlook of that experience.

TM: Your literary career is extensive. What are some of your career victories? What has been most rewarding for you?

DF: Oh, thank you for asking that because I suffered through my writing. Getting my first children's book published was extremely rewarding because it's a book about my father. It is a book that I wrote because my son said, "Why don't you tell that story?" For me, it's a family victory, and then getting my own kicks like, "Wow, I got my book published," because I always wanted to be a writer. From what people tell me, I'm surprised that the book is read across the country. Many schools, many parents read it to children. I had a mother from Poland write to me saying, "That's my story." I was touched because I'm writing about a kid from the Caribbean. I have so many people tell me that, so it's very rewarding that I find readers who respond to my story of what it means to arrive in the U.S. I'm lucky that I was able to write it. [Editor's Note: D.H. Figueredo is the author of *When This World Was New*, published by Lee & Low Books in 1999. The book is illustrated by Enrique O. Sanchez.]

The book that I wrote about the Mexican cowboys is also very rewarding because I feel that the U.S. narrative completely wipes out the historical significance of those Spaniards and Mexicans who came from Mexico from the early 1500s to the 1800s to create what we call today "the West." It's neglected, forgotten, not important. [Editor's Note: D.H. Figueredo is the author of *Revolvers and Pistolas, Vaqueros and Caballeros: Debunking the Old West (Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture)*.] I feel good that I wrote about it and people have responded to it, that universities use that book. That I can make a small contribution to the appreciation of who we are. Just the mere fact that there are people reading what I'm writing is like, "Wow, that's so cool. They care about my sentences." That's very rewarding.

What attracts me the most is children's literature because, as I said before, it's poetry, not fully appreciated, often dismissed because it's like, "Oh, all you write is children's literature. You cannot write a novel." It's very difficult to write a book for a child that will linger. I don't know

if my books will, but that's what I'm attempting to do. The other writings that I've done is because I'm friends with a lot of editors and they will say, "Would you write this?" if it's in an area of interest, which is Latino culture. I just want to tell people, "We are so cool and great, don't forget us." If my books can do that, I'm okay doing that. It's not about me. It's about us, and that's what I like.

CR: Is there anything else you would like to add?

DF: No, I think I talked for a long time. [laughter] If my wife were here, she would say, "Stop, stop, stop." Thank you for allowing me that. I'm very grateful. I just want more of us in academia. We're needed. We are in a very difficult time. We have to reaffirm who we are, not fighting, not through violence, but through the fact that we are so talented. We built the Mexican pyramids and the New World. We gave the U.S. the seed needed to become what it is, and that's what we have to remind people, acknowledge everyone else but not forget us. That will be it.

CR: Thank you so much for taking the time to come and speak with us.

DF: Well, thank you for listening to me.

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

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