

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MADAI CRUZ POOLE
FOR THE
RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
AZIEL ROSADO

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TRANSCRIPT BY
AZIEL ROSADO

Aziel Rosado: Hello, this is Aziel Rosado. Today, I will be interviewing ...

Madai Cruz Poole: Madai Cruz Poole.

AR: The time is currently 9:37 AM, and the date is Wednesday, June 13, 2018. Let us begin by asking when and where were you born.

MP: I was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Saint Peter's Hospital on September 12th, 1974.

AR: Is New Brunswick the place where you grew up?

MP: Yes.

AR: What were your parent's names?

MP: My father's name is David Cruz, and my mother's name is Marta Candelaria. I think her maiden name was Nuñez, [laughter] sorry.

AR: Where were they born?

MP: My mother was born in Utuado, Puerto Rico. My father was born in Salinas, Puerto Rico.

AR: What did they do for a living?

MP: My father, from what I understand, he came from Puerto Rico on a tomato boat. They got them young. Him and his brother, they came when, I think, my father finished maybe eighth grade. His older brother, José Bonilla, they had different last names. I don't know why. They have the same parents and everything; it's just a crazy story, but that's a whole other story. They came in a tomato boat. They were supposed to pick tomatoes in exchange for moving to, I think it was, Vineland, New Jersey. They were there for a while. I don't know how long is a while, but they were there for a while.

Then, like young people who want to explore and be free, they ran away from that tomato farm. The owner kind of shot at them or chased them with a gun. I'm not sure how accurate that telling is, but basically they ran off and broke that commitment. Then, they went to New York to do a lot of things. My father, he--what did my mother tell me the other day?--she said he would sell things. He eventually ended up working in a store, and then he ended up becoming a major dispatcher for Suburban Transit. He worked his way up from being a driver and working through the channels, so he ended up working for Suburban Transit bus company for many decades and then retired from that.

Now, my mother, she actually completed her high school education through the Job Corps. Back in those, days she completed the GED through the Job Corps in New York, I want to say. Then, she was accepted to a program at Brooklyn College in CUNY [City University of New York]. She did not complete that because they got engaged. She decided that she just needed to work full time, so she started working at stores and then started the family. She became a legal

secretary because in the Job Corps she studied secretarial skills, shorthand, and all of those business machines, she told me. Basically, she became a legal secretary for the Public Defender's Office in New Jersey. In between there, she worked for the Board of Social Services for Middlesex County. She just stayed with the Public Defender's Office until she retired through disability about twenty years ago.

AR: You stated that both your parents were born in Puerto Rico.

MP: Yes.

AR: Do you know what specifically caused them to migrate at the time they did?

MP: My father came over for the opportunity with the tomato thing. I think he was just going with his older brother because his father had died when he was very young. He was like eight years old when their father died. There were thirteen of them, I believe, originally. You know, back then they used to have a lot of children, and then several of them would die off or not make it through infancy. I think they ended up, as they grew up, they only were ten.

It's similar to my mother's family; her father's siblings were that way. He had thirteen siblings originally, and then three of them didn't make it for whatever reason in different ages and stages. Anyway, all this to say, I know my mother had come because her father had. It was during the '40s. I want to say during the '40s that her father started to migrate between New York and Puerto Rico to find work. On one occasion that he went back to Puerto Rico, he found out that she was born because the parents weren't together. My mom's parents weren't together, so when he found out about her, he wanted to take her. He didn't end up raising her really. It was all his sisters, you know *las tías*, and they raised her. He wanted to, I guess, take her out of that situation with her mother. She came over because he brought her over when she was maybe like around ten.

AR: That is very interesting. How did your family eventually find themselves in New Brunswick?

MP: I think it might have to do with my father's job with the Suburban Transit; they have a big hub in New Brunswick in downtown. I think out of the train station, they still do Suburban Transit buses, the bus line. I think it was from his job opportunities. Also, my mom has family here, so I don't know. I don't know why the other family members are here. [laughter] I can't remember who came with who because in those times, whenever my *tía* had trouble finding a place, they would kind of just bunk together. I remember nearly every aunt lived with us at one point, or we lived with them. It was kind of like when things are hard, we just stick together.

AR: Do you have family in any other places in New Jersey, or is it concentrated in New Brunswick?

MP: Well, it was originally New York and New Jersey, Brooklyn. Brooklyn was the heartbeat of our family at one point, in addition to New Brunswick. It was either Brooklyn or New Brunswick, but now they've spread out. Now, I have an aunt in Linden. I have an aunt in Long

Island. I have family, lots of family in the Bronx, then, of course, spread out through the rest of the world.

AR: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

MP: Yes, I have--I always forget to mention my half-sister. We weren't raised together, so I forget to mention her. I have an older brother who acts like he's my father. He's only three years older, but he just thinks he's like my father because we didn't grow up with my father. He wasn't in our house, my father. My older brother is David Cruz, Jr. [laughter] We're big into the Junior. I have my sister, Rosie, Rosa. I don't know what her legal name is, Rosa Cruz. She was born, I think, about a year or two after I was. My parents had trouble, and my parents were still together when Rosa was born. He denied paternity, but then over the years when he was kicked out of my mom's house, he would try to take me to visit his other daughter, even though he denied paternity. [laughter] He actually fled to Puerto Rico for quite a few years to try to not pay child support, even though he was only paying thirty dollars a month per child.

AR: That's very interesting.

MP: [laughter] Yes.

AR: Moving forward, what was your first language?

MP: It was Spanish, yes, but then my mother, studying the secretarial skills that she was studying, she wanted to master English. We would practice English in the house, and I would still speak Spanish. Spanish is what all my aunts spoke and all my cousins and whatever when we were little, but then when we go to school, it was English only. Back then, there wasn't a lot of ESL [English as a second language] support, and there wasn't a lot of encouragement to speak Spanish. It was pretty clear, "You need to speak English, and you need to speak it well," so we did. Then, English became my strong, dominant language. Over the years, my Spanish is not what it should be, *pero me defiendo*. Like the expression, I could hold my own.

AR: It began with Spanish. Then, as you learned English and the more you used it, it ended up becoming the dominant language, as you said.

MP: Yes, what's worse, my Spanish became that broken Spanish, in that household, I learned by ear, relearned Spanish or reinforced my Spanish wrong, just wrong. I still say things that are not quite right. I'll say something, I just don't know exactly where it comes from or what it means exactly. I just know the context in what you use it, like certain swear words. I don't know what they mean, but I know it's like that's an expression of frustration.

AR: I would imagine that is the case growing up in New Brunswick. Do you feel that there was any other students around you or friends that also had similar troubles having to learn English in school because as you said there was not any ESL support and New Brunswick is a predominately Latino population?

MP: Now, it is. It wasn't back then. Back then, I went to Sacred Heart Elementary School, which is now I think a Head Start program. The building still says Sacred Heart, and it's still next to their church. I don't remember any other Latinos. I was friends with white kids, black kids, and I don't even know where they were from because back then we were just kids. I just noticed you happened to be whiter than me, or you happened to be browner than me. I didn't know about culture until I got to Rutgers actually, which is weird because that's a long time to wait. [laughter] I don't know.

AR: As you grew up, there was not a strong Latino presence.

MP: No.

AR: Rather, there were white individuals and African American individuals.

MP: Yes.

AR: That is very interesting.

MP: It is weird because at family parties, they would play salsa. They would play merengue. I didn't know what the names of that kind of music was. I wasn't into it, but I kind of just related to it, like it's something they play at family parties. It was like, I don't know how I disassociated. I don't know; it just never dawned on me.

I remember when I was in second grade, my next-door neighbor, African American, Felicia, she was my best friend. You know, kids have arguments or whatever, and I remember one time she called me, "Cracker." I was puzzled because I don't even know what that means, and at that time, I had no clue about race. I had no clue about stereotypes or even the derogatory statements that people make, and then I went home. I told my mom and she just laughed and laughed. She's like, "She thinks you're white." I was like, "Am I? I don't know. What am I?" [laughter] I didn't know, and so my mom kind of told me that we were something called Puerto Rican. Since I was born and raised in New Brunswick and my neighbor was born and raised in New Brunswick, to me, we were just kids. Then, I think at family parties an aunt taught me to dance. She let me step on her toes to dance salsa. So, I kind of was taught these things, but I didn't know what they were.

In high school, I knew I was different. I knew I was the only Puerto Rican in my whole high school. I went to Rutgers Prep, so that's not a big high school to begin with. I was on an urban scholarship, by the grace of God, that's for sure, because I wasn't a strong scholar, but I know I was the only Puerto Rican in that whole high school.

AR: You kind of already did this, but can you describe a little bit about the community you grew up in? Were you close with your neighbors? Was there anything notable about it?

MP: Yes, so let's start off by saying I was never allowed to play outside unless my mom was there, because there was always prostitutes on one corner, and there was always the bar and the *borrachos* [alcoholics] on the other corner and then everything in between, the bad elements or

whatever. Then, I do recall a lot of my neighbors were black. I recall that on the corner there was a three-family-apartment house. On the first floor, there was the Cancel family. They were our best friends. Our moms hung out, so the kids hung out. They had a boy, so my brother hung out with him, and the youngest daughter, she hung out with me, Raquel.

Actually, totally aside, Raquel's husband ended up working here at Rutgers. I bumped into him during my first weeks working at Rutgers. She had talked about me to him so much, even though she moved away when we were younger. I'm talking when we were like seven, seven up until about maybe ten. Then, they moved away, and we never had contact since because this is before texting and email. You can't keep in touch unless you know where somebody is moving and have their new address, which I didn't, so we lost contact. Then, it just so happens that she had talked about me to him, so much so that he remembered my name because my name is kind of weird. Madai, you don't come across it every day. He was like, "That's a very strange coincidence. I wonder." He passed by, and he's like, "Oh, my God, my wife talks about you all the time!" So, it was really cool to know. Now, she was half Puerto Rican, half, I want to say, Dominican, yes. Then, they had best friends who used to be close to us who were Cuban. So, there were some Latinos, but, again, at that time, I couldn't appreciate anything significant about that. Looking back, I'm like, "Oh, my God!"

AR: When did you first start working?

MP: I started working as soon as I could get my working papers at thirteen. I worked at a store called Cindy J. Maybe I was fourteen. It was a summer job. I remember there was a Jewish owner. Not to say all Jewish people would be this way, but I know that on my first day, she was like, "Okay, I want you to watch the customers and make sure nobody steals anything, especially those Spanish people." I don't know if she even recognized me as being Spanish, even though my maiden name was Cruz. She just was like, "Keep an eye, keep eye." [Editor's Note: Ms. Poole points to her eyes.] She would give me a hand signal when somebody would walk in, and I noticed it would be people of Latin descent or color, brown people. She would just give me the double finger to the eyes thing and be like, "Keep eye, keep eye," yes, especially if they had a stroller. [laughter]

AR: Did you grow working various jobs, or did you stay there for a while?

MP: No, then I ended up working at Suburban Transit selling tickets. I think I had to be a certain age, like seventeen or something. I worked there for a couple of summers. I worked at a janitorial services company. Now, I will say, as a child, I would go with my mom to her second and third jobs because she did cleaning jobs. I would change the garbage liners, being a seven-year-old Boricua just changing the garbage liners. My brother would be in charge of mopping, and I would change coffee filters for their office space. We've always worked, but me being fully employed didn't start until I was old enough to get my working papers. Yes, it was always whatever job I could find.

AR: Where did you go to college?

MP: Rutgers College.

AR: What did you study?

MP: Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies and Administration of Justice, and actually, I have to really reorder that because it was Administration of Justice first. I just took the Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies courses because they fascinated me, and I thought it was going to be my minor. I just kept on taking so many of those courses that I ended up majoring in it, double majoring.

AR: You explained why you pursued the Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies courses. What made you want to pursue the Administration of Justice?

MP: I wanted to be a lawyer. I was fascinated by case law, and I loved writing legal briefs and explaining logic. I mean, I aced "Logic, Reasoning, and Persuasion." I just loved the ability to present all the facts in a logical order and then make a persuasive argument as to why someone should come to a certain conclusion.

AR: Were you a first-generation college student?

MP: My mom didn't complete, so college graduate, yes.

AR: Can you tell us a bit about your collegiate experience as being the first college graduate? Some people go, and they do not really understand what they have to do or how to navigate their way through the collegiate experience. Do you feel like you had some sort of support?

MP: Again, I have to preface the fact that I was never allowed to play outside, so I had no idea what the world was like. My mother protected me very much. I was never allowed to go outside because she was always working two and three jobs. I was only allowed to play outside if she was out there with me, which she never was, so I never really explored the New Brunswick community beyond my block.

When I went to Rutgers, and it was this whole big world of kids, I didn't really know what to look out for. I was so sheltered with Catholic school and everything. This is kind of a separate thing, but we were raised Catholic, where I basically believed if you taste a drop of alcohol, you're going to die, like you're going to go straight to hell and you're not ever going to [heaven], like you're done. [laughter] I don't know if it was something that was instilled in me by home or school, but, yes, it was severe. I was dysfunctional, so when I got to Rutgers, I was like, "Gasp, they're all doing these things." I really didn't associate with all of that, although I made friends, and I didn't engage in that activity with them. I just really felt like I was going straight to hell, without the whole judgement of them. I didn't in anyway go like, "Ooooo." It didn't bother me that the Rutgers community was behaving in a particular way. I just knew what I was raised with and felt that, "No, I can't do that."

I went to Sacred Heart up until sixth grade--so, then, my mother, who's very good friends with the nuns at Sacred Heart, they scrambled, and they said "What can we do?" Then, they sent me to Sacred Heart to finish seventh and eighth grade--no, Saint Peter's Elementary School, *perdón*,

I was saying Sacred Heart too much. Seventh and eighth grade, I went to Saint Peter's, but then for high school, my mother was very concerned about sending me to New Brunswick High School because at that time, I had cousins who would turn up pregnant before graduation. They would have babies very young, and my mom was like, "No, we're not doing that." She talked to whoever she could and made arrangements to do extra cleaning jobs at the schools and get me this urban scholarship so I could go to Rutgers Prep.

Now, when I got there, I went kicking and screaming because I was like, "I don't want to go to school with all these kids who have yachts and fancy cars," and it turns out that many of them really do have fancy cars and yachts. I actually found that Rutgers Prep prepared me for Rutgers College. They pushed me. I was by no means an "A" student at Rutgers Prep. I wish I could've been. I don't think I was self-disciplined enough, but the habits that they instilled in me prepared me for Rutgers. There is no relationship between Rutgers Prep and Rutgers, you know that, right? Rutgers College, I think maybe if you go back a hundred years, there may have been at one time or other, but it was all men. Anyway, all this to say Rutgers Prep prepared me for Rutgers College. I had gotten loans, so that I could live on campus at Rutgers College.

I stayed at Campbell Hall one year. Was I in Frelinghuysen? I was in Hardenbergh, the river dorms. I only stayed in river dorms. No, *también*, I was an EOF [Educational Opportunity Fund] counselor. I was an EOF student, and they also helped prepare me as far as studying skills. I'll never forget that EOF program in the summer. They had this red book. It was Dean [Eve] Sachs--I'll never forget--and Wally Torian, who's still here. He was there at that time, but my advisor was Hector Bonilla, amazing man. He keeps a whole Rolodex and encyclopedia of Puerto Rican history in his head, and he could just rattle it off. I remember I couldn't even keep up. I would be listening, and I would be like, "I don't even know what I just heard." It was amazing.

Anyways, EOF did prepare me for Rutgers as well, as far as studying skills, as far as dorm life, before I actually dormed, but with people of my culture and beyond, like a whole mixture. I didn't know what that was like to live with other young people until then, so that was great. From there, they hired me to be a counselor every summer for incoming freshmen. It was not one of the river dorms. It was one of the middle buildings. I don't remember what it was called. Anyway, yes, that prepared me for Rutgers.

I feel like I hear stories because now I work so closely with you guys in the department that I feel like maybe Rutgers has changed. Maybe, I was just so--not secluded, because I joined clubs like RUEP [Rutgers *Unión Estudiantil Puertorriqueña*]. I actually became a vice president of RUEP the end of my freshman year, second half of my freshman year, and that's where I actually joined the dance troop. Then, they taught me what salsa is, what merengue is. I took "African Belief Systems in the Latino Community," and I remember being deathly afraid of my instructor because she had those eyes, like she could see through you. I feel like I learned so much about culture, my culture, other people's culture. I learned what it's like to be *Puertorriqueña* in New Brunswick, and I learned what the difference was between a hundred percent Puerto Rican and being Caucasoid. I didn't realize that Puerto Rican was a mixture, and that it had many different levels to that mixture. I really attribute a lot of that to the Department of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies. I remember one professor in particular, Professor José Morales. He

was an adjunct professor for many years. He was great. I think he was Cuban or Puerto Rican, I'm not sure. I can't remember. My memory sucks. [laughter]

AR: You have lived around the area of New Brunswick for most of your life.

MP: Yes.

AR: You noted in the beginning that there was almost no Latino presence, at least in your experience. Now, it is completely different.

MP: With EOF, we're kind of brought together. Then, once Rutgers life starts in September, we're all dispersed. We all know we can find our own little mecca at Latin Images [Living-Learning Community], so that's where we would get together. I didn't live there. My cousin ended up living there. She's a year younger than I am, so I had a lot of memories visiting Latin Images. My brother actually went to Rutgers, so he also lived in Latin Images. I knew what that was. I mean, Rutgers was in my backyard my whole life, so I kind of knew I was supposed to go to Rutgers. When my brother went, certainly I had no choice.

I will say that my high school guidance counselor told me there's no way I could make it into Rutgers. Again, I went to Rutgers Prep, highly competitive school. I was among the minority, although it's interesting because there's a huge Indian, Asian [population]. I'm trying to think what other cultures were there at the time. Yes, it was a huge Indian and Asian population there, not huge, but more than Puerto Ricans certainly. I remember now, there was another Puerto Rican girl. I think she was a year or two older than me. I wasn't a competitive student, so when my guidance counselor looked at the schools that I was applying to--I put on my list Syracuse, NYU--Rutgers was my safety because I was like, "I'm expected to go to Rutgers, and my brother went to Rutgers. I don't want to go to school with my brother," because he was only three years older. I'm like, "I don't want to go to school with him." My guidance counselor told me that, "Scratch off all those other schools." Rutgers is my super stretch, apply to Middlesex County, and maybe I'll get a college education. So, being my stubborn self, I applied to all of those schools. I got accepted into all of them, I mean, talking Ithaca, Hofstra, I applied to all of them, and I think there was some sort of waiver that I could get for the fee because of my mom's low income. I applied to all of them, but the scholarship to NYU was very, very low--it was a seventeen-thousand [dollar] scholarship, which wasn't nearly enough to cover the tuition and expense to go there. It wasn't going to be enough. Then, Rutgers did definitely accept me, and the irony--okay, in high school, I was an actress. I did a lot of acting. Every single play, I was always lead or supporting lead. I wanted to be an actress at that time, so I applied to Tisch School of the Arts. I applied to Mason Gross, and I did the auditions. I was actually a Governor's School scholar for acting--and then both NYU and Rutgers College had told me, "No, you should go to the General Studies Program." So, they accepted me but not to their special arts program. I was like, "I can't believe they did that," but then it ended up being a good thing. It was definitely a blessing.

AR: It seems that your mother was very keen on making sure you had a great education from all the work that she was putting in.

MP: Yes.

AR: Is that something that is stressed throughout your whole family, or did she kind of gear it specifically towards you?

MP: My brother is actually super brilliant, and he went to New Brunswick High School. He hated it so much that he--I don't know how he did it--but he accelerated his timeline to graduate a year early. He was such a strong student that he was valedictorian. He was chosen to be valedictorian of that senior year class, and there was a big political uprising because there were other kids who had been in that class, but he bumped the projected valedictorian down one notch when my brother bumped up to become senior. He went freshman, sophomore, senior. He didn't do junior year. He was just, "I'm done. I want to be out of New Brunswick." He was such a super strong student and overachiever in and of himself that my mother never put any emphasis on that.

Now, I was always just kind of not, so I think that's why she put that extra emphasis and was extra concerned about getting me into good schools and not New Brunswick High School. She wanted to put me where--I mean, I'm thinking, I'm putting words in her mouth I guess, but I think she put that extra emphasis because she didn't need to for my brother. Oh, wait, freshmen year of high school, she put him in Saint Peter's High School. When she put me in Saint Peter's Elementary, she had put him in the high school. Then, they weren't able to sustain that for whatever reason, and they moved him to New Brunswick High School. So, he did sophomore year at New Brunswick High School, and he was like, "No, we're not doing this." Then, he skipped his junior year. I don't know how he skipped; they skipped his grade [he took an aptitude test at NBHS]. So, yes, that emphasis on education wasn't as much on my brother since he was very self-directed. I did not have that. [laughter] I have it now. I didn't have that back then.

AR: Moving forward, do you have any connections that you maintained with the island? Do you have family out there?

MP: Yes, I have lots of aunts and cousins, lots of cousins. In 2000, we actually had a family reunion, *el encuentro de la familia* Candelaria. That was in 2000, and I believe it was 185 of us that were able to gather. There were more that couldn't make it, and that was from everywhere coming to meet up in Puerto Rico. Nowadays, a lot of the *viejos* [elderly] can't travel. And the young people, they get caught up with life, so we keep saying we're going to do another one but have yet to do so. We still have family there. I actually have a cousin who moved to Ohio after Hurricane Maria. She was pregnant, and she needed to be able to start a life with her new life. My grandfather passed away a couple of years ago. I buried him in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, and I still have many of his siblings--not all his siblings--many of his surviving siblings are still over there, a couple over here. My brother lives in Boca Raton, Florida. My father moved to North Carolina. Yes, it's just a lot of my grandfather's siblings and their offspring that remain in Puerto Rico.

AR: You mentioned Hurricane Maria. I wanted to ask about how you experienced that because you did have family out there.

MP: There was a period of "Maybe it won't be so bad" as they say because it happens quite often that they predict there's going to be a bad hurricane. Everybody on the island is pretty accustomed to, "Oh, it wasn't so bad." It hit another part of the island that it didn't necessarily hit my family, who's generally centralized in the Arecibo area. So, this time, when we were watching the news reports and we saw that the eye was going right through and that the whole island was going to be hit, the whole island, we were like, "This can't really be happening." It was the perfect storm that we really didn't think was going to be as bad. We were hoping it wasn't going to be as bad as what had been projected and what was being shown to us on the news screen.

When the hurricane actually hit, we didn't have any connection. We couldn't communicate with any of our family members. For a while, I remember we were trying everybody's cell phones on a daily basis. What my family here did was we setup a WhatsApp group chat. I had never used that app until that point, but they say for digital communication it was easier for the family in Puerto Rico. If anyone of them could get a connection that WhatsApp would be the best way to communicate with them, so we did that. We did a family chain. My family still maintains it to this day, where they still encourage each other daily. Especially with a lot of them that didn't have power for many months, they would bunk with each other. My family members, actually, I think they all moved into my *Tía* Aida's house, which is now falling apart. They all kind of huddled together in Puerto Rico to just kind of get through it.

Mostly, they were concerned about the oldest sibling in their family, *Tití* Cheny. Her legal name is Hortencia, [laughter] like the flower, I think. She tried to stay positive through it, but she passed away about a month ago from *la pulmonía* [pneumonia], due to complications from mold. She has bad asthma. She's always had chronic asthma, but what she would do is she would have a lot of air conditioning in her house, especially in her bedroom. With the hurricane, they lost electrical power for a long time. I don't know their living conditions exactly because they would always try to smooth it over when they spoke to us, so that we don't worry. They would be like, "Oh no, *estamos bien*, we're okay. Don't worry about us." Their biggest worry was us worrying about them. I believe they did the best they could. They had grown up picking their own mangos and *aguacate* [avocado] and surviving however they could, so this was not unbearable for them. What would be unbearable is to know that we're suffering for them, which is crazy.

So, my family, we held family meetings. We did our first family meeting at my house, where we were trying to organize. We still didn't know exactly what the situation was with our family. It was maybe a week in after Maria. Our family came in from different places, Bronx, Brooklyn, Linden, New Jersey, wherever we could, kind of local but not. We were like, "What are we going to do?" We don't know what their needs are. We don't know who's in contact. We don't know what to do or how to even get anything there. We don't know what the situation is. So, we were like, "All right, we're going to collect money," because we know that they are going to need supplies. As soon as we can get in contact, we'll have it ready. That was all we could do to mobilize ourselves, and so we did. We took up a collection. We were looking at news reports, and that's when the news started to say, "You can't get there. They're letting nobody out." Then, we started seeing reports about the island and the conditions there, like aerial reports but nothing concrete about my own family. It was a very disconcerting time, I'm sure for all Puerto Ricans.

We were just worried about the elders, a lot of elders. What are they going to do? Then, my younger cousins over there were able to move about. They would literally walk to different areas to check on neighbors, and unbeknownst to us, they were bunking together at whoever's house they could and huddling and just kind of hunkering down and waiting.

AR: After that incident, did you have family that moved out of Puerto Rico as a result?

MP: Yes.

AR: Was it a lot of family or just a couple members?

MP: Just a couple of members, like I mentioned my one pregnant younger cousin, Paloma. She moved to Ohio with her betrothed. She was actually scheduled to get married. They wanted to get married before the baby was born, and they had the wedding plans and invitations and everything. Then, Hurricane Maria hit. I think they were going to get married in October. That clearly didn't happen, so they moved as soon as they were able to get tickets out. They moved right to Ohio because she was already expecting. She just gave birth, I want to say last month, something like that. The digital platform really helped us to stay in touch. It's interesting because it's a new level of communication that I didn't even have with them before. I could've, but it just didn't dawn on me. We get busy, but now we're all up to date with each other.

AR: Moving more towards your own experience, can you tell us how you ended up as an administrative assistant here at Rutgers?

MP: When I graduated Rutgers, I did not apply to law schools. I didn't find a field of study in law that I wanted to embrace. I know that law school is something that unless you have the wherewithal to pursue it and finish, and I didn't even want to start. I didn't want to start unless I knew I had the passion and drive to complete it, but, being the child of a legal secretary at the Public Defender's Office, I saw the weary eyes. I'd go to my mom's job, and I would see the lawyers. I would see the judges, and I would go help her with work or just watch her. I thought I was helping. [laughter] I didn't want that life, I said, "Maybe later I'll go to law school." Even today, I sometimes play with the notion because I do love a good argument, and I do believe in the spirit of justice. I just don't believe it exists here. You know what I mean? If it really existed and it was something that I could achieve, great. I feel like it would be all that work for nothing because there is no justice, but that's a whole other story.

I ended up pursuing pharmaceutical marketing, pharmaceutical communications, because my roommate at the time, she had a friend who was working in some company. Then, they were like, "Oh, they're looking for more people. You want to join?" I was like, "Yes, it's a job." Now, keep in mind throughout all of college, I was working on the side as a per diem at Woman Aware, which is a domestic violence program. I was a counselor, and I would work at the outreach office to help women appear to get their restraining orders against their abusers. I would help translate, even though I was not officially a translator, but just to give them that moral support because it's very daunting to go to a hearing against someone who you care about and who you thought cared about you and put a restraining order. So, I would go with them, just to give them that kind of moral support and encourage them to just do what's right for them and

their family. Then, I would help them at the actual shelter with whatever it is that I had to do in supporting them there, whether it is within the shelter itself or whether it was the intake process, interviewing prospective new community members.

I always worked, but when I got that full-time pharmaceutical marketing opportunity, I was still a senior at Rutgers; I was a super senior. [laughter] I was always working though, so I was trying to juggle working full time at that pharmaceutical job. I was a program coordinator, which ironically is my title now. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I started out there, and then I stayed in pharmaceutical marketing because it paid very well. There was a point in my senior year I told my mother, I was like, "I don't even need to finish my bachelor's. I've got a real job. It's got real benefits. It's got a salary. It's got everything I could ask for, a 401K." She was like, "Over my dead body. You're going to finish that bachelor's degree, or I will kick you out of this house." She would've kicked my butt if I didn't finish. I had maybe, it was something stupid, like six credits left. I was like, "I don't need it," I was just missing a core requirement, I think it was--it wasn't even number of credits to graduate. I had enough, but I just wouldn't have finished. I don't know, something like that. It was something stupid where I was like, "I don't need to finish." She was like, "Yes, my ass, you're going to finish." With pharmaceutical marketing, the problem is it's very competitive, so I did that. In that field of work, it's very cutthroat. It's very jump to the next best thing, keep jumping, and you only grow by leaving the company to another competitor, so I did that for a long time.

I made really good money, but I was always also spending money going on trips with my now husband. We started dating in high school. We got our first house, and I got my first car. We did all that stuff, but then as I started having children, you go on disability, you know, maternity to have your children. Yes, companies didn't like that, so they would let me finish my projects and then kind of let me go, not always but three times. I have three children. What happens is when I was younger, before children, I would be able to jump jobs, no problem, make more money, no problem. I would get multiple offers and then be like, "Which one should I choose?" Now, as you get older, you're a mother, so it shows up. Those gaps show up on your resume, and they're like, "So, what happened here? What happened there?" You're like, "Well, I started my family." I would go right back to work. Two months later, I would go right back to work, and they were just like, "What if she wants to keep on having kids? We can't really do that." Then, there are the days where it's like, "Oh, my son is sick," or, "I've got to do a doctor's appointment." Those things, I guess in their eyes, make you less marketable, although I was always a very highly productive person with a strong work ethic. My mother taught me that, so it was never an issue of not producing. It was that issue of, "Well, is she going to have be out?" Hey, if my son's sick, I'm sick.

Also, I think what really drove me to come to Rutgers--keep in mind I've been applying since I graduated--but it was always that, "Don't call us, we'll call you." I never got a call, so I'd just keep going with my pharmaceutical little life. When I was diagnosed with cancer in May of 2012, I had the cancer removal surgery in July of that year, and the doctors were like, "Yes, you're not quite healed." It was a thyroidectomy because I had thyroid cancer. What happens is when they take out your thyroid, you actually need that. It's actually important for your metabolism and all these things, so after the thyroidectomy, I experienced what they call "foggy brain." It was difficult for me to focus without a thyroid. I didn't know that was going to happen

to me prior to surgery. I thought, "They told me I had to take it out." I'd take it out, no problem. I was never told of the ramifications that that would cause. It was really hard to go back to work. The doctors were like, "You're not ready. Your levels are all crazy." They accidentally took out some of my parathyroid, which is necessary for calcium production. My calcium levels were through the floor. For example, the thyroidectomy procedure was supposed to be one day, one night of observation in the hospital. I ended up in intermediate intensive care for four days, for four nights because my levels were so crazy. They were worried because everything was just basically shot to hell, all my levels. My system wasn't responding to all the synthetic medicines they prescribed; my body wasn't accepting it, so it was just a long process to recovery.

The pharmaceutical industry, the company that I worked for was not okay with me taking all that time on disability, so as soon as my disability, literally the day my disability--I think it was FMLA I took, family leave--[ended], they let me go. So, that was September of that year. I had my surgery in July. By September, my disability had run out, and they were like, "Bye bye, thank you so much, good luck." The irony of this is that my levels started to level off by November. By November, they were calling me back to come back because they couldn't find anybody to do what I used to do and to work to the level that I worked. The ass-kicker is that they hired me to help them keep the projects going that I had been doing because they hadn't found anybody that whole time to do that work. They hired temps left and right, but they couldn't find anybody to do that work like I did. So, I did. I went back in November, and I told them I had to be at a reduced rate because I need to be more at home and not--literally I would sleep with the phone right by my bed. If a client wrote to me at three in the morning, you are expected to respond. You better respond, or else it would turn into a huge fire by the time you got in at nine AM. You can't wait. It was that kind of lifestyle that I told them I cannot do because I was a director at the time that I had been diagnosed. Now, I was like, "Ok, I'll just be a trainer. I'll come in. I'll do the work." I literally stayed there for another, I want to say, year and a half. I think I stayed another year and a half because they hired five different people. They would all quit because they were just like, "This is BS, no way, this is too much. The expectancy is too much, and we can't perform to this level. This is ridiculous. It's unreasonable." I was just doing it, making sure these projects kept going. They were on task and on budget and I was getting them done.

Once all of those projects finally launched, I got a call to come to the HR [human resources] manager's office. I totally didn't expect it, and they were like, "Now that all of your projects have launched ..." I'm like, "Yes, I helped them with proposals for new work, and I helped them with roll-on business based on what I produced." They were like, "Yes, we won't be needing you anymore." I'm like, "Oh, okay, as of when?" They were like, "Today, you can pack up," because that's how pharmaceutical is. It's literally that day. Literally, I was very lucky they didn't walk me out that minute because that's how it is. It's very sensitive information, very proprietary, but they were like, "No, take your time. Pack up your desk. Say goodbyes to whoever." I'm like, "Okay, I'm good." I ended up working late that day to make sure my projects were [organized], because I wasn't expecting to be done. I was doing the reconciliations and making sure all the things were filed away in a nice way, neat for whoever needed to access them later.

Once I experienced that kind of insensitive treatment, I was like, "Yes, I need to find something different." I applied to an ad agency, and I worked there for a while. I worked wherever I could. I was never really stable after that. It was just jumping around, like one year here and one year there because I guess I didn't find my right match. There was a time where I wasn't employed for six months, and I was like, "Okay, I need to pay bills. I can't do this. My husband's struggling with trying to pay all the bills, and my mother lives with me." She's been disabled for twenty years. She has MS [multiple sclerosis], so we paid for--we have a live-in who takes care of my mother. There was an incident--oh, this is going back about fifteen years--where I was at work, and I get the call, frantic, from the live-in who said that, "*Martita se cayó*" [Marta has fallen]. My mother's name is Marta, and she had gashed her face open. So, it's a concern. We have to have somebody home who can be with her at all times to make sure *que no se caiga* [that she doesn't fall]. Also, she can't use her hands to cook, so to help take care of her *bien*.

I needed all these things to be paid, so I was like, "I'm going to go to bartending school." [laughter] So, I went to bartending school in Edison, and I proceeded to work at whatever bartending job I could. Over the summer, my daughter's Little League team finished their season, and I decided I'd throw their team party because I was going to keep up my children's lifestyle. Even though we were struggling financially, they don't need to see that. Then, one of the moms I had never met before--never saw her at the games or maybe we never introduced ourselves to each other--I'll never forget, she was just like, "Hey, I know they're hiring in the Department of Latino Studies. Why don't you apply there?" I was like, "I have applied to Rutgers so many times, but they've never responded. I don't know. Yes, I guess so." I thought she was just being nice, but literally she stayed in touch.

The next day, she sent me the email of who I needed to contact, Professor [Carlos] Decena. He was so good, and he was like, "I need to speak to you right away." I had sent him my resume, and he was like, "Oh, my God." You know, I'm not going to lie--I have a lot of experience. I talked to him. He was very happy that I have not only the work experience to jump into an office setting, but that I am personally invested because I'm an alum of Rutgers, and not only of Rutgers, but also of the very department I'm applying to work for. I was just like, "Is this really happening?" He was like, "I need you to send your resume to HR right now, and I need you to come in. Can you start Wednesday?" I was like, "Wait, what? This is all so fast." [laughter] I couldn't believe it was really happening, and I literally started on September 5th of 2015. It's just been such a blessing. It's frustrating sometimes because I wasn't used to the academic world. In pharmaceutical, everything is about efficiency, and everything is about making these applications and computer programs talk to each other, making everything integrated, and that it's just instantaneous information and very structured and organized. When I got to Rutgers, I come to find that we need to use many segmented applications here, and then you have to reenter that same information into another application in order for things to happen and move along. It was very frustrating at first, but now I'm kind of used to it. [laughter]

AR: With that being said, do you have any additional comments or information you would like to share with us?

MP: I would say that my experience is probably very unique in that I got the opportunity to go to Rutgers Prep, and that I ended up working at my alma mater in the department that I graduated

from. I consider it a success story. I actually told somebody that this was a dream come true to come work for Rutgers. Now, I know my children will get the same opportunities I had, God willing, [laughter] my brother's experience even, in the same family. He may have different experiences because he had to work from the age of thirteen and actually start helping my mom pay the mortgage at a very young age. So, I feel like every Puerto Rican has their own story, and I look forward to seeing what you guys produce because there are so many different stories.

AR: Thank you. I would just like to thank you for taking the time to conduct this interview. As we noted before, this interview will be transcribed and used for our research of Latinos in New Jersey. Additionally, this interview will be kept with ROHA's database, which is the Rutgers Oral History Archives, and that is it. Thank you very much.

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Transcribed by Aziel Rosado 7/14/2019
Reviewed by Lauren Smith 06/05/2020
Reviewed by Kate Rizzi 6/14/2020
Reviewed by Madai Cruz Poole 7/24/2020
Reviewed by Kate Rizzi 7/27/2020