RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH CARMELA BECERRA

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES
and
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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Monica Madera: This is Monica Madera interviewing Carmela Becerra for the Latino New Jersey History Project on the 24th of November of 2019. You can state your name.

Carmela Becerra: Carmela Becerra.

MM: Okay. We're going to start off with just a basic question. When and where were you born?

CB: I was born in Cali, Colombia, on October 26th, 1964.

MM: What were your parents' names?

CB: My father's name was Manuel de Jesús Becerra, and my mother's name was Fabiola Peña.

MM: Do you have any siblings?

CB: I have three siblings, two girls, Alcira and Gabriela Janet, and a brother, Manuel Americo.

MM: Can you tell me about your childhood in Cali? What was it like growing up there, and do you have any distinct memories with your siblings or friends?

CB: Growing up in Cali, Colombia, it was very nice. I can't say that I have a bad memory of my childhood. On the contrary, I just have beautiful memories, a family that was very united and got along. We just fit into the scheme of things over there. My father worked, and my mom was a homemaker. My father had a good job, so he provided us with a good life and we had everything that we needed. He also was able to provide us with things that we wanted. I have wonderful memories about my friends from when I was going to school, especially from what over here would be called high school.

MM: You could say it in Spanish if you want.

CB: To the point that we're still in contact almost on a daily basis, so I don't have any complaints. I'm just thankful that I am able to still be friends with friends and family from my childhood.

MM: What exactly did your dad do? Was that a well-off job in Colombia?

CB: My father started as a construction worker and eventually developed into *maestro de obras* [foreman], I don't know how that would be called here, but he was in charge of the construction they were doing. He had an important job at the construction company he was working for, and it provided him with a good salary. Like I said before, he was able to provide us with living in a very good area that even had their own club, so it was good.

MM: I know that we have my great-grandmother and your grandmother.

CB: My grandmother, Dionisia.

MM: I know that she is native Colombian and also African.

CB: Yes.

MM: Did you ever feel any racial tension within Colombia or any prejudice against indigenous groups or Afro-Latinos or Afro-Colombians? Or within the family? Because we're a ray of sunshine. [laughter]

CB: Absolutely not. I'm completely totally mixed. My grandmother, her family is definitely black. My grandfather is totally white. Then comes my father, who is a mix, and then from my mother's side my grandmother's father was a Spaniard, as white and blue eyes as they can be. My grandfather was Indian, native Colombian Indian. I'm just a mix, and I grew up with everyone being basically either a little bit lighter or a little bit darker than me. For me, I never felt any type of racism or anything like that in Colombia. Even to this day, when I go back there, yes, people will say, "Oh, this black person or whatever," but it is never said in a discriminatory way. I would say that sometimes it is said fondly. Personally, I cannot say I have experienced any racism in Colombia, but unfortunately, it's not the same here.

MM: You grew up during the era a little bit before the cartels were rising, but you were old enough to experience it. Did you ever feel that strain of violence or the turmoil escalating? [Editor's Note: In the 1970s, the Medellín cartel began its operations smuggling cocaine into the United States.]

CB: Unfortunately, I was able to experience when things were getting bad and the government started losing control of the situation, but it was also a hard situation because I remember the first house we lived in that I have memory of, our fence was the cocaine plant, the coca plant, outside. That was normal, and it was just taken to another way from these people that developed this business. But honestly, I have memories when I was like five years or six, seven, that everybody in the neighborhood would have a coca plant in the front of their house or in the back of their house, and that was normal. My mom used to use it for us when we were sick, she would put it in alcohol, and she would rub our stomach or our head or whatever ache we had, and it helped. Unfortunately, all that was taken into an industry that started separating the country and bringing it into a war.

MM: Were you consciously aware of this violence? Was it something that affected you directly, or was it just rumors through the grapevine?

CB: No, it was something that we would start experiencing. It was getting dangerous to be out at night, or there were certain areas that you didn't want to go through and all that. My sister and I used to take public transportation to go back and forth to school, and I remember my sister once being very scared because she actually saw when a *sicario* [hitman], which is a person who goes on a motorcycle, shot someone else. She was very impressionable, I didn't see it, but she saw it. Yes, it was something that started affecting everyone, and people started taking precautions.

MM: On your pre-interview survey, you wrote that your brother served in the military.

CB: Yes.

MM: Was that a part of this?

CB: Well, I don't know what the rule is right now in Colombia, but when my brother finished high school, he went to the military. I think they have it over here.

MM: A draft?

CB: Like a draft, so he was selected to go. Most of the people are selected to go, except if they have like a physical condition or something like that. At that time, I don't know how it is now, but at that time, he had to go. He was lucky enough, I guess, to be sent to the people who would be taking care of the president and that was basically his commission, like traveling around where the president was going.

MM: Like a form of secret service?

CB: I guess we could say that, but in this case, he would be like the last one of the secret service. [laughter] I'm pretty sure other people were closer to the president, but he was sent to that area.

MM: When he was drafted did your family feel scared because of this violence going on?

CB: Yes, especially my mom. It was, I guess, an experience that a lot of my friends also went through at that time, and I can say that my brother was very lucky to be selected for that because some of my closest friends were sent to areas that were a lot more dangerous.

MM: Did this political uncertainty affect the economy in Colombia?

CB: It did. Colombia is a country that is extremely rich in every aspect, the emeralds, the gold, the agriculture, everything. Colombia can produce anything, but because of this violence, the transportation of goods was sometimes unavailable and it increased [the costs in] the economy. People had to pay more for whatever, gas, gas was a big issue. Especially the farmers, they suffered a lot in these times because that's when a lot of the warlords wanted to take their land or stuff like that, so it was bad.

MM: Did this push your own individual decision to come to the United States?

CB: Well, the reason I decided to come to the United States was because I had finished my ...

MM: Bachelor's?

CB: Not my bachelor's, the one before, two years?

MM: Associate's.

CB: … Associate's degree in drafting and I couldn't find a job. I kind of didn't want to work in the company my father was working. I was like, "No."

MM: [laughter] Sounds familiar.

CB: [laughter] I couldn't find a job, like almost up to the year of me finishing. I started studying German because I was planning on going to Germany, but my aunt that was living here told me to come here. That's basically the reason I got here to the United States.

MM: Was it an easy decision?

CB: At that point, it was because I did want to work, and I did want to support myself. I didn't want to stay. I mean, I was eighteen, nineteen years old and I still was dependent on my father for everything, and I just didn't think that that was right.

MM: Was the transition to the United States hard because you didn't know the space, or was it easier because you had family here already?

CB: I don't know. I think the first year was very hard. It's totally, totally different. A lot of things were so different to me, and it made it hard. But, you know, I found jobs and I was working. I guess that's, at the end, what I wanted to do.

MM: Why did you decide to settle in Elizabeth, New Jersey?

CB: Because that's where my family was living at the time, and I didn't know anyone else except them, so I stayed in Elizabeth.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit more about the Colombian diaspora in Elizabeth?

CB: At that time, there was a lot of Colombians in Elizabeth, I think even more than there are now. My aunt had a business in Elizabeth, and she knew a lot of people.

MM: What was your aunt's business? Can you state her name too, please?

CB: Oh, her name was Gloria Demico, and she used to have a travel agency. It was a lot of people that she knew and traveled back and forth basically to Colombia, most of the time. It was a lot of Colombians there, like the bakery with the goods that liked from your country, like the restaurant with the food that you are really missing. I felt like I was in Colombia every time that I was there.

MM: Did your siblings follow in your footsteps?

CB: My sister came, I think, two or three years after I was here. My brother also came. But my sister stayed for good here, and my brother goes back and forth.

MM: Having your sister here with you, was that an easy thing for you? Was that more familiar?

CB: I guess it was more familiar. We stayed together for a while. It made things easier, I guess.

MM: What were the relationships like between the Colombian community and other Latinos in the area?

CB: It was funny because when you first met someone, it's like, "Oh, this one is from Cuba, this one is Puerto Rican, this one is Colombian. He is from this part or she is from this city." It is part of the introduction when you were meeting someone, they are Latino, but where are they coming from. Now I realize it was funny, but they kind of get together.

MM: Was there any tension or did you feel like there was any tension between different groups?

CB: Latinos, no.

MM: What do you think a Hispanic or Latino is defined as in the U.S.?

CB: At this point?

MM: Then and now.

CB: I think then, it was more like, because there was more like the Cubans and some Puerto Ricans and Colombians, it was more educated Latinos in the United States. Yes, there were Latinos, but they had a certain culture and would do a good job. Let's put it like that. Now, unfortunately, because most of the Latinos, there's a lot of people from Central America, I had noticed that it is more like they refer to Latinos as uneducated and just workers that would do the job that other people don't want to do, and it's unfair because any Latino, whether they're South American or Central American, can do any job if he's taught how to do it.

MM: Is that definition right or wrong to you?

CB: What do you mean?

MM: Is the stereotypes that are given to Latinos right or wrong to you?

CB: It's absolutely wrong, because anyone from any country can have the capacity to do well. Let's say, I'm going to be very specific, Mexicans are just seen, they are perceived sometimes as very low because they are the ones that work the farms or they are the ones that do the heavy work, but guess what? If we don't have farmers, we won't eat, so why don't we just treat everyone the same way? Some people think, "Oh, they're just good to clean." Okay, we need someone to clean. You know, we all need each other. We shouldn't look down at a person just because they are doing a manual job instead of a job that requires more thinking. But anyone from anywhere can do that. Everyone is able to do a manual job, and everyone is able to do a job that requires you to think more.

MM: Was having a close immigrant group helpful or hurtful in your assimilation to the U.S.?

CB: I guess I don't have a defined opinion in that sense because I have always tried to get along with everyone. I grew up where I wasn't looking at the skin color of the person, so it's something that I tried to keep doing all my life. I don't have a definition of that.

MM: Do you think it's fair that Latinos are simultaneously linked to immigration?

CB: No, it's not fair. The only reason that we are linked to immigration is because of the color of our skin, but if you really look at it, there's immigration from Poland, Russia and all that. The only difference is they are white, so they look like they are from here. However, if you look at the numbers, they also cross from different points, but they're just lighter. Latinos, well, we were blessed to be close to the sun, [laughter] so we have color in our skin.

MM: What are your opinions on the current events regarding immigration?

CB: Well, the United States is supposed to be the first country in the world, leader in politics and the best thing on Earth. However, I found it very, I don't even know what word to use that wouldn't be a bad one, that can't get an immigration system working. If someone wants to come to the United States, okay, fine. Let the person come, whether it is through land or through airplane, whatever. Make sure to take the information from that person, give them a number that would follow that person all over the country, and you know where that person is, you know where to find that person, you know that the person is to pay taxes, you know of the person's health, instead of making things so hard. If the person commits a crime, you have a number, you know where that person is, you're tracking the person. It's not that hard. Corruption exists in all systems of the world and here in this country, but that is another issue.

MM: Okay. What made you decide to settle permanently in the United States?

CB: Because I got married and I had two beautiful daughters, and so I decided to stay here. But it is interesting that before I met the father of my daughters, I was planning to go back to Colombia, but I didn't. That's the reason I stayed.

MM: What year did you get married?

CB: 1992.

MM: 1992. Can you state his name and his country of origin?

CB: Federico Madera and Puerto Rican.

MM: What were some of the difficulties, if there were any, trying to incorporate both cultures into your life?

CB: Oh, that wasn't easy. Yes, we speak the same Spanish, supposedly. [laughter] But the Spanish has totally different meanings. It was two words that we would always end up fighting

about. It was *ahora* and *ahorita* because it means "now" and "right now." What for me was "now," it means I would be doing it later, and for him "now" was immediately. For me, "right now" was "right, right now" and for him "right now" was "later." We always used to fight over that. Another thing is food. It was always the same food when we went to his family's [house]. In Colombia, we have so much different plates and diversity. Those were the easiest things, but honestly, culturally, it was hard.

MM: Do you think that the general stereotypes that all Latinos are the same hinders us as a community?

CB: Absolutely not, we're Latinos because we belong to a geographic area and most of us speak Spanish, because honestly Brazilians are part of Latino communities. They fit in geographically in our area, but they don't speak Spanish. But we are all very different in our cultures.

MM: So, to be put in the same categories and stereotypes is not the right thing.

CB: I don't think so.

MM: Okay. How old were you when you had your first child? What is her name, and when exactly was she born?

CB: I was twenty-eight years old. Her name is Nicole Christina Madera, April 1993.

MM: What were the challenges you faced raising your children in a different culture than yours?

CB: Well, I think it was okay, until they went to school. When they went to school, then comes the American culture. Every time they came home, "Oh, I have a sleepover," and the answer always was, "Nope." "Oh, but my friends are going to be there." "Nope, I will take you. You'll be there for a few hours and I will bring you back home." We don't do that in Colombia, and even in Puerto Rico, from what I understand, they don't do that. It was hard to explain to our daughters that, "No, you're not going to do that." It was also hard for them to understand that just because other kids go to the mall by themselves at ten, eleven, twelve, that doesn't mean you are going to the mall with your friends at ten, eleven, twelve. I guess the American culture is more free, I don't want to say they don't care, but they see it from a different point of view than we do in our culture. Another thing is that the girls got used to, before they leave the house they would have to ask to be blessed. Also, another thing is, when we'd call them, like, "Come here," they will have to answer like, "Yes, ma'am," not that, "What?" none of that, because they knew better. That "what" was going to mean they would be in trouble.

MM: What are some ways you incorporated the Colombian culture in your daily life, things that you grew up with that you taught your kids?

CB: That I still do every day?

MM: That you taught your kids.

CB: Well, I think I tried to teach them everything like the way I was raised. I tried to raise them the way I was raised. I don't know if they have incorporated it in their life or not, but at least I tried. [laughter]

MM: When and why did you decide to go back to school?

CB: When the girls were starting to grow up, I did want to spend more time with them. Especially in the summertime, it was hard because they had all this time, and who was going to watch the kids? So, that's when I decided to go to school and become a teacher, so I would be able to spend more time with my children.

MM: Was that always something that you wanted to do?

CB: No, to be honest, but I did like children. I love working with children, so actually, it worked out perfect, because I enjoy a lot what I do now.

MM: What exactly is it that you teach?

CB: I have been a bilingual teacher for eleven, twelve years. Now, I'm working as an English as a second language teacher.

MM: What grades?

CB: Right now, I'm working first grade. I have done second grade, third grade, fourth grade, and now I'm doing first grade.

MM: Would you ever consider going back to Colombia and living there?

CB: Oh, yes, that's my plan. I'm just waiting to be able to retire and looking forward to going back.

MM: What would you do there?

CB: Live life. [laughter] Life in Colombia is a lot more relaxed than here. Yes, people still have to go to work. Yes, people have problems just like here, but for some reason, it's not like here, Monday through Friday, you just run like crazy and go to work and get home really late and all that, and then Saturday and Sunday's doing errands and you don't have time to relax and enjoy. For some reason, over there, it's like you enjoy every day.

MM: What would you say you miss the most about Colombia?

CB: Everything. [laughter] I think one of the things that I miss the most, how friendly people are, how nice they treat you. They're always polite. You meet people and you go walking on the street and see someone, they would say, "Good morning, how are you?" You go to a store, they greet you so nicely. Not like here where you sometimes are like, "Hello? I need help," and they don't care. That's one of the things that people in Colombia are very, very friendly, very, very

authentic, honest. It doesn't matter what you hear on TV. Unfortunately, all that bad image is just for a very small group of Colombians who have given a bad name to the country. But people from all over the world love to go to Colombia to the mountains and see the people, how they are, and they fall in love.

MM: Right now, in Colombia in the past week, there have been several protests against the current administration, Colombian administration. Do you think that it's almost history repeating itself in regard to the constant flip-flop of Colombian politics, or what are your opinions on these protests? Can you give a little backstory to it as well? [Editor's Note: In November 2019, large-scale protests amassing hundreds of thousands of demonstrators began in Colombia, initially calling for labor unions to strike and eventually taking on many causes. Directing grievances against the government and President Iván Duque Márquez, protestors began advocating for economic and political reforms and rights for indigenous peoples, as well as protesting against corruption and police brutality. The protests continued into February of 2020 and then resumed in September of 2020.]

CB: Well, I haven't been there in the last thirty-something years, so it's hard for me to give you an opinion, but what I could see is that after years and years of violence, there was President Uribe, who happened to give the country peace for his eight years of government. Of course, there's always people who are not going to be satisfied with any type of government. There are always going to be people who are criticizing what they're doing. Unfortunately, there are people who are against the government and whoever followed Uribe's way of seeing things, and there are the ones who are in favor. [Editor's Note: Álvaro Uribe Vélez served as the president of Columbia from 2002 to 2010. He then served as a senator from 2014 to 2020, when he resigned amidst a bribery scandal.]

Personally, I don't have an opinion. I haven't been there for so long. All I know is that while Uribe was the president, I felt safe to the point that I would go there with my daughters and we all stayed up until really late and we never, thank God, had any issue. I was in Colombia this year and I couldn't feel that safe as I had two years ago when I was there, but it was not because of the Colombians. It was more because of the immigration from the Venezuelans that are coming to Colombia because their country is having whatever problems, so now they're bringing us their problems.

Yes, it has been an awful week in Colombia, but if you really look into it, Colombians are protesting in peace. You see a lot of the pictures of people marching. They're protesting because apparently the government wants to increase the age for retirement, touch people's pensions and salary and minimum wages, and there is a part that says that if you are younger than twenty-one years, you're just going to be paid a ridiculous amount that it wouldn't even help you to buy food, so that's what people are protesting against.

At the same time, all these acts of violence, unfortunately there are acts of violence, they're coming from people that we could say are inadequate, I guess, people who want to just to rob and are loitering, do things that have nothing to do with what the real Colombian person is. I don't want to judge or say without me being there, but I have heard that a lot of these people are

Venezuelans coming into Colombia to do just damage. Honestly, it's a situation, Colombia is just reflecting …

MM: Reflection?

CB: … Is just a reflection of what is happening in the whole entire world because everybody is protesting. Hong Kong, Indonesia, Chile, all over the world is protesting for one thing or another. It's just I guess a phase the world is going through right now, and we're a part of it.

MM: Do you think it is history repeating itself in terms of Colombia's political history?

CB: Like I said before, I haven't been there for so long.

MM: Since the 1940s, there has been warfare against some sort of political government going on and then the FARC and all of that. Since then, obviously, there has been a truce between FARC and the Colombian government and whatever guerrilla warfare was going on or cartels. But what I'm saying is, in regard to that, where there's always some sort of political uncertainty at some point, is this just another step to those political uncertainties, or can this problem be resolved? [Editor's Note: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, is a rebel guerrilla group that signed a ceasefire with the Colombian government in 2016 after more than fifty years of conflict.]

CB: Personally, I am the kind of person that thinks that this is never going to be solved. Humans tend to think that they are right and whoever thinks against the way that they think is wrong. Colombia is a country of forty-some million persons and to make everyone agree is not going to be an easy thing. I think that I, like you said before, maybe it's unfortunately history repeating itself.

MM: Before we wrap up this interview, is there anything else you would want to share?

CB: Well, I just want to say that, like I said before, Colombia has a bad image of a country that is drugs and guerrillas and stuff like that. No, that's not what Colombia is. If you ever have the opportunity to go, you will see a different country. You will see people being nice. You will see a rich country, beautiful, beautiful, scenes. Whether you go by the mountains, whether you go to the water, it doesn't matter where you go, people would be very friendly to you. I invite you to go and know my country, Colombia.

MM: Thank you for doing this interview.

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

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