RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA EALEY

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Amy Castillo: It is Tuesday, June 12, 2018. It is 12:54 p.m., and I am interviewing Maria Ealey. She is the administrative assistant in the Latino and Caribbean Studies Department. So, I want to start off by asking you childhood questions. When and where were you born?

Maria (Lozano) Ealey: I was born in Colombia, in Medellín, in 1981.

AC: What was it like living there?

ME: It was challenging. I will say, I was born in Medellín, and I lived, when I was younger, I lived in a very bad area, where a lot of crime happened all the time. [laughter] So, it was kind of challenging, because sometimes, you had to close the door because people [were] just getting killed in front of your house. When I was little, that was when the whole drugs and cartel thing was going on. I think everybody who was growing up in that time was a victim of whatever was going on with the drug lords in Colombia at that point. So, we all lived and grew up seeing it and thinking it was normal, but when you get older, you think, "That was not normal. Why was it normal for you to close the door and windows, because you knew someone was going to get killed two steps away from your house?" Those are the types of things that we had to witness and kind of adjust to, as I was growing up. When you were walking to school, you could see somebody dead that just got killed, and you just kind of knew how to move away and keep walking, because it wasn't your business. You just needed to keep going.

AC: Wow. Can you describe the community you grew up in, the people and how they contributed to your growth?

ME: They definitely made me stronger, I would say stronger, because you have to kind of learn how to deal with--I don't even know how to put it into words--deal with the environment that you are in and learn how to adjust and learn how to not take it personal. That's not your fault that you are in that environment, and most likely, it's something that not even your parents could control, but that you were, unfortunately, a part of. In that sense, it made me mentally stronger, because you just learn how to, like I said before, you learn how to deal with circumstances that any seven, eight, nine year old, or even five year old, which is when I recalled being young and seeing people getting killed, that it's not normal. But it makes you definitely value more life and education. I was always told by my dad that you needed to get educated in order to get out of this type of environment. Yes, I think it made me stronger and persistent.

AC: Thank you for sharing. What were your parents' names?

ME: My dad's name was Jose Salomon Lozano Cifuentes, and my mother's name is Patricia Del Socorro Alvarez.

AC: What did they do for a living in Colombia?

ME: My mom was a stay-at-home mom, she didn't work, and my dad was an attorney. He had his own practice.

AC: Do you recall each of their backgrounds?

ME: Yes. Well, my mom and my dad both came from the neighborhood that I mentioned before. It was a very violent, poor neighborhood where they met and grew up, and my dad knew that the only way out was education, which [made] him go to school. He went to school, he became an attorney, and then he opened his own practice. When I was around ten years old, that's when we moved, and then, when I was twelve, that's when he got killed.

AC: How did your dad get through the university and become an attorney?

ME: Grants, scholarships. For undergrad, my dad represented his university as a boxer, so he got a grant. For grad school, he was very smart, so he got a scholarship.

AC: What type of law did he practice?

ME: Criminal.

AC: Do you recall him telling you any stories?

ME: Well, the biggest one that I know--and it's unfortunate because that's the one where he got killed for it--my dad was one of the attorneys who was working on defending Pablo Escobar.

AC: How did the case overall impact your father?

ME: Oh, it impacted him in several ways. It impacted him, it impacted us, one, because I think the reason why my dad wanted to practice criminal law is because he always saw the good in everyone. He felt like everybody needed a chance to be defended or prove the innocence or not. I can't quite say that was the reason why he defended this person, because at that point, I was young, and I know that if I would see who I knew my dad was, I would've never understood why he defended him. I also know that the way these types of people worked was not like a choice type of thing. So, like I said, I was very young, so I never had the chance to discuss it with him and ask him the question like as to why he chose to. I remember when we used to get bullied in school, because people knew who my dad was and they couldn't understand why he was defending this person. We would have teachers who told us what type of father we had that was taking such a case, and we had classmates who were against who my dad was defending and then they would just say mean things to us. I remember asking my dad, "Why are you defending this person?" and his answer was, "You're too young to understand." But the way he put it was like, "Everybody has a chance to be represented." I'm not quite sure that's whom he wanted to be representing, but I think the circumstances made him represent this person.

AC: What class status would you consider yourself to be when you were in Colombia and your dad was an attorney?

ME: We were definitely not rich, but we were middle class. My sister went to private school. I didn't want to go to a private school, but I did [go] to a Catholic school, all-girls school. My mom didn't work. We had somebody who came to help my mom with the house chores, and we

had everything we needed. I mean, we were not like super rich, because we were not, but I could tell you that you see the difference between what it was when my father was still going to school to what it was when he finally got his own practice.

AC: You mentioned your sister. Do you have any more brothers and sisters?

ME: I had three sisters.

AC: When you were in Colombia?

ME: Yes.

AC: What did …

ME: I have three sisters; I have two half-sisters and a half-brother. My father didn't waste time. [laughter]

AC: Okay. What are they currently doing for a living?

ME: My older sister is a nurse. She is a registered nurse. Then, myself, I'm an administrative assistant, and my other sister is also an administrative assistant here. My younger sister--she's ten years younger than me--she went to school here; she graduated from communications. She got married as soon as she graduated. Her husband is in the Navy, so they just relocated to Washington. Right now, I don't think she's working, because she was in Virginia with him before and now they just moved, but she did get her bachelor's degree.

AC: Okay, so now I have cultural questions. What type of food do you remember eating in your culture?

ME: Rice and beans, and fried pork and sausage, like chorizo, and egg, yes.

AC: What types of music do you remember listening to when you were in Colombia?

ME: When I was young, I remember listening to a lot of salsa. They call it salsa *vieja* like Willie Colón, and, yes, all the salsa *vieja*, La Fania. My mom, she liked the old music too. She liked Camilo Sesto and Amanda Miguel, and that was what became my music, because, basically, you would listen to music when you're doing chores, so everybody shares the music. [laughter]

AC: Was your first language Spanish?

ME: Yes.

AC: Did they offer English classes in Colombia when you were in school?

ME: When I was in school, they started offering English classes when you go to sixth grade. It's like one hour a week. It's not one hour every day; it's one hour per week, at least that's how it was then. I don't know what it is now, because they probably are trying to implement more English and have the country be more bilingual than before. When I was there, it was only one hour a week, and basically, you just learned the basics: silence, please, chair, window, door. Even when I came here--back then, I was already in the equivalent of junior [year] in high school--it was not like full sentences. Like I mentioned, all I knew was little words. When I came here, I knew door, bus, chair, silence, but I wasn't fluent. I had very little background in English.

AC: Was it hard for you to learn when you came here?

ME: It was, and I don't think it was hard because it was a different language. I think what it made it harder was that I came to a place where the culture had a lot of Latinos. Then, instead of then integrating you, they segregate you. So, they put all the Latino-speaking people in one side of the school, and then they put all the non-Latino-speaking people in another side. They don't include you with people who speak English right away. They tend to send you to ESL [English as a second language] classes. When you go to ESL classes and forty-five other people speak Spanish, I don't really think that you don't feel the need to speak English, because everybody else who's in the same classroom with you speaks Spanish. That made it really hard.

I was getting good grades in my classes, but I don't think I was learning as good as if I was put in a different school district. I see the difference from other people who come here and go to a different school district, compared to myself, and you see the difference. I still have an accent. I've been here for--I was fourteen, I'm thirty-seven--twenty-two years, twenty-three years, and I still have an accent. I compare myself to other people who reluctantly came at the same time as me and they speak perfectly, but that's just how it was. I had a Spanish-speaking teacher, who was also bilingual, teaching me, and I just learned from talking to other people who talked just like me. Even when we were saying things wrong, nobody ever knew when we were saying something wrong, because we all understood each other. If we didn't, then we would just say the word in Spanish like, "Yes, you know what I mean, that thing, *eso eso allí*" [that's that there]. Then, you're like, "Oh, yeah, now I know." Then, somebody would say the word in Spanish, and you're like, "Yes, exactly." We never felt the need of like, "We really need to learn," until I decided to go college and I realized how behind I was.

AC: When did you first migrate to the United States?

ME: That was August 1995.

AC: Was Paterson the first city you and your family migrated too?

ME: Yes, and I cried from the airport to Paterson because I couldn't believe where I was going.

AC: Who helped your family migrate to the United States?

ME: Well, this is when the story gets better. My aunt came here when she was twenty years old, my mom's sister, and she actually came here illegally. She crossed through Mexico, and I remember, even being little, hearing the story of how it took her almost a month to go to the United States and it was a period of time where we didn't know where she was. Then, she finally made it here, and she met with my grandmother's sister, who was already living here. She stayed with her for a couple of months, and then she got married, she got her papers, and she got a job. She's been cleaning houses since she came here. She does her independent business, she just cleans houses, and she still does. Then, when she got married, she petitioned for my grandmother to come here, and then my grandmother had her green card about six, seven years after my aunt came here. Then, she came, and my grandmother petitioned her other seven kids, including grandkids.

AC: Your grandma's sister, do you know why specifically she was in Paterson?

ME: Because that's where her husband was, and that's where the group of people they knew from Colombia was. They knew somebody in Paterson, and that's where they came and that's where they still are. I've been here twenty-two [years]; they've been here probably forty years or plus. They landed in Paterson. They knew a relative who was here, a friend, and then once they got a job and situated in Paterson, they're all still in Paterson. Everybody who came, came to the person they knew in Paterson, and then they just got their apartment and now they're in Paterson. The next one came, and they just helped them get the apartment next door. I don't know if they never felt the need to get out of Paterson. They were comfortable. They had their two jobs; everybody had two jobs. They all worked in the same place and live in the same apartment buildings since they moved here.

AC: What was your first impression when you moved to see all these people in one house and you realized that things were going to change?

ME: It was sad. I was sad. I felt like life had cheated me, not only because I lost my father, but now I lost--not the material stuff--but I lost being comfortable. I was comfortable where we were in Colombia. We had the house, we went to school, I had good friends, I had my father. Then, when I came here, I realized that although we had a lot of family here, we were alone. It was my mother with four children, four daughters, and three of us were teenagers. Then, my mom had a two-year-old daughter when we came here. My sister was two years old. So, it was very sad and very challenging to accept it, because one day you just realize your life just completely changed and you had no say and no way to get out of the situation. You just basically had to adjust, and I think, in that sense, living in Colombia in a very bad neighborhood when I was little kind of prepared me to deal with the situation that I was confronted with when I came here. I came here on August 5th, and then, the next day, my aunts had already found out a cleaning job for me to start working. I came here on a Sunday, and I was working on a Monday. I was already doing cleaning at an office building the next day. My mother was too and my older [sister]. The only one who didn't was my twelve-year-old sister, because she had to stay home and watch my younger sister, the two year old.

AC: You said you worked cleaning offices.

ME: Yes

AC: What was the majority of the other coworkers that worked with you?

ME: Colombians, yes. I would say ninety-five percent Colombians. The owners were Polish, and then, I would say maybe one percent Peruvian, one or two percent Peruvians. Yes, it was just Colombian, and then, I knew like maybe five or six people that were Peruvians out of--when I left the company, it was over a hundred people who worked there, yes.

AC: What was the Paterson community like when you first started going out and exploring?

ME: I think it's sad. To me, it was sad, because I just noticed the pattern that nobody felt that they were in the wrong place. Nobody felt the need to move out of there. They were comfortable. Everybody who I passed by and I was around, even people who I went to school with, they were just comfortable being there. Nobody really seemed to realize that that environment wasn't the perfect environment, that if you go to school, you could do better. They felt like they just belonged there. For me, it was just really sad. Not only did I come here and realized that my entire world had changed, but also when I came here, I came to a school that was at war. There was a war between Muslims, like Palestinians, and African Americans. When we went to school, I felt like I was put right back in Colombia, because we had police in every hallway. You saw people stabbing, there were guns, there were people shooting each other, for what reason I don't know, because I came when that whole thing [had] already started. You never understand why two teenagers are stabbing and killing each other. I never understood. So, it was very frustrating and sad to see how comfortable everybody was. Still, if I go to visit my aunts and my cousins, I feel sad and disconnected because their mentality is they feel fine and they feel that where they are is the place where they need to be.

AC: You said that there were Muslims and African Americans in Paterson. What was the majority of the population when you first moved into your area and in the school?

ME: My area were Colombians and [Arabs]. The area where I grew up is called South Paterson, and when I came, I think it was equally distributed between Colombians and [Arabs]. I believe, now, it's mostly [Arabs]. At school, it was divided, [Arabs] and African Americans. I remember seeing maybe ten percent whites, not even, I would say like two percent whites, and then Hispanics were, I would say, at least ten percent. The majority of the school [were] African Americans and [Arabs].

AC: Did you have a favorite place to eat or to shop or to hang out when you were in high school in Paterson?

ME: Well, my favorite place was a restaurant, because I loved the Colombian food. I had two favorites. One is a bakery. It's called La Sultana, and it's right on Main Street in Paterson, because I love the bread. If you went there at six o'clock in the morning, they had like warm bread, and that's something that always brought me back to Colombia, to be able to get the fresh-made bread. So, that always made me happy. Then, if I ever wanted food, there was a place

called El Tipico. I don't know if it's still there, but when I was young, that was one of the good places to eat Colombian food in Paterson.

AC: Where did you usually shop?

ME: Clothing or food?

AC: Both.

ME: Okay. If it was food, my mom was special at thinking that going to ten different places was going to make her grocery shopping a little less [expensive], because she was saving every single penny. [laughter] What she didn't realize is as we drove everywhere, we were spending a lot more on gas, but she never knew because she'd never drive. My mom came here when she was thirty-one years old, and she refused to get a license. She was afraid, because insurance was too expensive. Anyway, she never felt the need until I was the first one to get a car. I got my permit when I was sixteen and I was able to buy a car, and since then, I became her chauffeur. So, she didn't need anybody, she still didn't find a need, and as every one of us got our license, she became dependent on each one of us to do what she needed to do. [laughter] Yes, food shopping was a mission. We'll start on Saturday, let's say, at one o'clock, and then, we'll go up the street to Main Street, a place called Stop One. That's where she would buy her meat, because there's a butcher there, so they cut the meat as you want it. Then, from Stop One, she would go to Corrado's for vegetables. Then, from Corrado's, we'd go around to 21st Street to that supermarket. Oh, my gosh, I can't remember the name. It's right across the street from the Chinese place where they sell *pollo* [chicken].

AC: CTown.

ME: CTown. Then, we'd go to Ctown. Yes, so, we were at CTown, Corrado's, and Stop and Shop. So, by the time we'd get back home, it was five o'clock, every Saturday.

AC: Were you employed in the city besides your office cleaning job?

ME: No.

AC: You worked there throughout high school.

ME: Yes.

AC: How many people lived in the household?

ME: Well, where we lived, it was a building. So, it was a three-story apartment building. Each apartment had two bedrooms and a living room and a dining room, but the living room had those doors that slide indoors that you could open and close. So, every single one of their families, including my mom, made that a bedroom. It didn't have a closet, but it closed the door, so that was a bedroom. So, it was--on the first floor, it was my aunt with her husband and her two kids. Then, in the second floor, it was my grandmother, my aunt who never got married, my uncle

who never got married, then my aunt who had a kid. She wasn't married; she had a kid when she was twenty-one. So, it was them. Then, in the third floor, it was my mother with her four daughters. One of those rooms--see, my mom always rented a room, because she couldn't afford the rent by herself--she always rented a room to somebody, in the back, by the kitchen.

AC: How was it going to high school at JFK [John F. Kennedy], besides the fights and stuff? How did you feel your overall education was? Were you involved in anything? Did you play sports?

ME: I did not play sports. I used to play basketball in Colombia, and I remember that was one of the worst memories I have when I came here. I wanted to be a cheerleader and play on the basketball team. When I went to try out, I remember my gym teacher was a Puerto Rican lady. She spoke Spanish, but she didn't like it. She was more English fluent than Spanish fluent, but I know her background was Puerto Rican. When I went to try for the basketball team, she told me I couldn't play because I didn't know the language. So, I didn't try it ever again. That was one of the worst feelings you could have, because I felt like that was the only connection that I had with me, because I loved the sport. Yes, that was devastating to me when I went to try out and she said, "No, you don't speak English. Next year."

AC: Did you participate in any of the ethnic parades in Paterson?

ME: Not in Paterson, but I remember we used to go to the Colombian parade every year in Flushing Meadows, in New York, yes, Flushing Park [in Queens].

AC: When did you become a citizen of the United States?

ME: As soon as I turned eighteen. [laughter] Yes, because I was a legal resident. You had to be a legal resident for five years, unless your parents become a citizen before, but my mom didn't. So, I was actually nineteen, because I needed to be a legal resident for five years, and when I turned nineteen, I signed my paperwork. I remember it was my first year in college.

AC: Since you weren't involved in school, were you involved in the community?

ME: I didn't have time. I used to go to school, and because I needed to get all the credits to graduate, I had from zero period to ninth period. So, I used to get out of school at 3:05, get home, eat, and then go to work. At that time, I had already increased my hours, because I needed to pay for more things in order to survive. So, instead of working from six to ten, like I did for the first two years, I was now working from six to twelve. Then, I would come home and do homework and get up at six to go to school.

AC: Do you remember any major events or any memories in the city?

ME: Not really, not really.

AC: Did you follow any of the politics when Latinos were running for mayor or for councilman in Paterson?

ME: No. I remember a name being very familiar and I think it was Joey Torres. I think he was the mayor in Paterson at one point, and he was a thief. [laughter] That's the only thing I remember about Paterson and politicians, because it was a big deal. He kind of ruined Paterson more than what it already was. So, instead of helping the people, he went and took all the money from the people. Yes, so, that's the only politician that I know and remember from Paterson. [Editor's Note: Joey Torres resigned as mayor of Paterson in 2017, after pleading guilty to charges of criminal misconduct.]

AC: I am going to move on to your college years. What made you want to attend college?

ME: My father. My father, he always told us, since we were little, that education was the only thing that no one could take from you, and that's still with me and I felt the need to educate myself.

AC: What was attending Berkeley College like?

ME: It was easy, in a way, because it's not like a super hard college. If I did my work, I got my "A's" and I left. A lot of people were people who were going back to school and adults, so it was no time to play around. Most likely, everyone who was there was interested in getting their education, complete their degree and be done. In that sense, it was easy. It was a goal for everybody, so we all had this common goal that we needed to complete. It was a lot of support. Everyone felt the need to support each other, because we all knew that the only reason why we were there is because we wanted to complete and have a degree.

I know it's totally different, I know my younger sister, she went to school here. If I see her and how she grew up to how I had to grow up, she didn't have to work when she was going to school. She had a chance to dorm. She had a chance to travel overseas. So, it was like a totally different experience than me. I just had the chance to go and I had a goal that I needed to complete. I needed to basically have good grades, because if I didn't have good grades, I would have to pay for the course again and that was not in my budget or my inspiration. I couldn't. It was impossible to think that you could fail a class. For me, it was not only that I knew that it was my only way out, but I couldn't afford to fail. If I fail, that would mean that I needed more money, and I was working. I worked in a factory a couple of hours; I worked cleaning houses and babysitting and cleaning offices. I had all types of work in order to save the money to pay for my school. I knew it was only my hard-earned money that I would waste if I fail.

AC: Were there a lot of Latinos around in Berkeley College?

ME: Oh, yes. When I went to school there, I would say forty percent Latino, forty percent African American, and maybe ten percent Caucasian.

AC: What kinds of Latinos do you remember interacting with?

ME: Colombians, Dominicans, and a few Peruvians.

AC: What made you want to study international business?

ME: I wanted to travel. I wanted to be able to go and see the world.

AC: Was tuition difficult to afford for you?

ME: I was lucky, in a sense, because through all these cleaning and babysitting [jobs] that I did--I, one time, got a job to clean this big mansion in Saddle River. Here I am, a nineteen year old, trying to go to college. Cleaning houses, when you are young, it's a good business. It's cash, you go and you do your job and you leave, and you get paid 120 dollars a day if you clean a big house. Back then, if we were cleaning offices, I would work six hours, five days a week. That means thirty hours every other week, and I'll get paid like 360 dollars after tax. For me to be able to go and clean a house in four to five hours and get 120 dollars, it was a lot more than I could imagine getting. While I was cleaning this big mansion in Saddle River, I started getting familiar with the people who owned the house, and then they asked me one time if I wanted to babysit. I said, "Sure," and then I started babysitting for them. The person who owned the big house owned Berkeley College. They knew that I was paying myself through school, and back then, I was in Bergen Community College. I started my college in Bergen Community College, and I was paying, I remember, nineteen hundred dollars for twelve credits, in order to be full time. So, I had already completed two semesters; I was nineteen years old. Then, they were like, "Oh, where are you going to school? How are you paying for school?" So, I told them my entire story, and one year, for my birthday--because I think it was on my twentieth birthday--the guy asked me if I wanted to go to school at Berkeley, when I was in the county college in Bergen County. I was going for nursing. I had completed all my pre-courses already. I was ready to take the test for nursing. Then, he told me, "If you want, we could pay for your college, but we don't have nursing at Berkeley, so you would have to basically change your major." That, and I wanted to travel the world was one of the things that made me change. From all the majors that they had at Berkeley, that's the one that I felt like I could do better at.

AC: Were you still living at home?

ME: Yes.

AC: During your undergraduate years?

ME: Yes.

AC: What were big challenges that you faced as a student at the college?

ME: Having to go to work all day. I had a class at eight o'clock in the morning, and then, from there, I would go and clean the house. Then, after I finished cleaning the house, I would come back and take another six o'clock class, and then you go to class from six to ten. Then, I come home and you've got to do homework, and then you've got to get up again at six o'clock in the morning because you have to do it all over again. Either I had babysitting duties or cleaning duties, and I had all these jobs in between. I would leave my classes at nine o'clock to go clean the offices that I worked at and then come home at one o'clock in the morning and basically start

everything. Every day was the same thing. Then, Saturdays and Sundays, I would babysit, because that's the time when they would go to a Yankees game or a Devils game. I needed the money. They liked that flexibility and the fact that I wasn't attached to going out, where I had friends or any other activity. My main activity, my main goal, was make money, pay your bills, pay for your school, and get out of Paterson. [laughter]

AC: Were you involved in any of the organizations in your college?

ME: No.

AC: Were there any Latino organizations that you remember?

ME: Yes, I know they have a sorority and they have different groups, but that was more like--they have a dorm--people who dorm there. I didn't have the time to dorm or a chance. I had other duties that I had to do besides going to school.

AC: Did you participate in any of the activist movements that were going on, whether it was in college or was in Paterson?

ME: No.

AC: What were some major events that were going on throughout college that maybe affected your experience?

ME: My mom getting sick.

AC: Did that pose any problems for you to graduate, or were you able to stay on track?

ME: No, it did, because now I went from taking full-time classes to being part time, because we had a responsibility to help with [finances] more. My mom was sick for a period of time when she didn't work for like six months. That means that between myself and my two older sisters, we had to come up with the rest of the money for the rent or whatever, other items that needed to be paid at the house.

AC: Did you have any mentors in college?

ME: No. I think that that's one of the things that Berkeley doesn't have. They cannot groom you to go on and have a career. They just want you to complete your [degree]. They understand what their market is. At least, when I was going there, like I said, a lot of people were older, so they knew what they wanted and they were just looking to complete a bachelor's degree and they understand that that's who the market is. They understand that a lot of these people already have a life. This is just for them to complete a goal or to better themselves. So, they don't really try.

I'd had one professor, I remember he was an African professor. I can't remember his name, but I remember he used to make us write ten-page papers. Every time he saw me, he always told me that I should become an attorney. I said I could barely speak English, or writing, let alone be an

attorney. [laughter] He would say, "No, but …" He was my international business [professor]. All my international business requirements were with him, and he always thought I could be an attorney. I don't know why. He was like, "You should go to law school. You should go to law school."

In my high school, I did have a mentor in high school. It was my math teacher, and I met him when I was a junior. When I was a junior, I was taking algebra with the seniors because basically I knew the math. I recognized it from Colombia. The only thing is that I couldn't speak English, but I could solve all the problems without even understanding. So, I was put in seniors math when I was a junior, and that was the first time my mother got sick. My mother had cancer when I was a junior in high school, and then I remember him being a really big support and checking up on me and asking me if I ever needed anything to come to him. I'll never forget him, Mr. Nelson. He thought I should be a math teacher. So, I had one that thought I could be a math teacher and one that thought I could be an attorney, and here I am being an administrative assistant. [laughter]

AC: Did you pursue anything in the business field?

ME: No. I graduated. I was working for a company, basically for insurance. The company was called Hyacinth Aids Foundation. I was a discharge planner, and I used to schedule appointments and help inmates, women and men who came out of prison, to find them shelter, health benefits, and kind of help them link back into society. I wanted to help people, but it was mostly because that's one of the companies [through which I got insurance coverage]. Before then, I was working with an attorney, so I was making decent money. I was a secretary for an attorney, but she couldn't give me insurance because it was just her practice and it was only her. I needed insurance, because I didn't have an insurance, and I didn't have insurance for many years. It was like four or five years that I didn't have insurance, and I was always concerned because of all the health issues that my mom had not to have insurance. So, it wasn't like I've had a career path that I've been following. It's more like circumstances that made me get every single job I that had to now. [laughter]

AC: Did you leave your household in Paterson as soon as you graduated?

ME: Before.

AC: When?

ME: It was my last year in college, and I moved in with my husband now. He was living in Edison.

AC: Where did you guys meet?

ME: We met through mutual friends.

AC: What does he do?

ME: He works for ADP. What is it that he does? Basically, they give him projects, and he has to make sure that they complete those projects. Project manager, that's what it is. He's a project manager.

AC: When you were in Paterson, did you participate in any of the elections, since you were a citizen?

ME: No, no, because I didn't really think that it was necessary or that it would make any impact, based on what we knew from the past. So, no, I didn't. I started participating in voting and everything after I had my first child, because then I felt like my vote would count and it was going impact the environment where he's going to grow up. Now, I feel the responsibility, because now it wasn't just me but also my kid, and that's when I first started getting involved and looking into candidates, who do I think is the best or not best, or which one would bring a better library budget for the kids to read, and things that I never even thought about when I was young.

AC: What has been your favorite source of employment so far?

ME: I love working here. I mean, it's challenging at times, but I love working for this department. I feel connected, because I feel that in this department, although it's a big university, when I get to this part, I feel like I'm at home, like I'm with my own people. It makes me feel good about working here. I don't know, it's kind of hard to explain, but, yes, I love working here. I don't know if in the future I would move to a different place in order to grow, because there's not too much room to grow here within the department, but I just feel identified. I like it here.

AC: What have been some positive changes that you've seen in the department since you were employed here?

ME: I have seen the department grow in many ways. I feel like when I first got hired, I didn't see so many students feel connected with us and now I see they feel that the department is part of their culture. They feel connected with us. I see more and more people who come by, and sometimes, they don't even need anything. They just want to say, "Hi," and stop by and attend the events. They are interested in taking the courses, because they want to know more. So, that's something that I noticed that has changed and grown through the years.

AC: Where do you live now?

ME: Piscataway.

AC: Thinking back to living in Paterson, now living in Piscataway, what are major differences that you have seen?

ME: Everything. Based on what I see with my kids, the education, they make sure that the kids have--I won't say the best--because I'm sure there's other places where they have better education, but they put an effort in making sure that these kids are learning and that they are at a level where they could compete with any other good district that has good education as well, to

prepare these kids, to make sure that they enroll in colleges, or that they will be able to have a good base for them to get older and see the need for them to go to college. Also, this town is so diverse that you see so many people who are professionals, people who are doctors, who are lawyers, who work here at this university. You see them, and even myself, sometimes, it's like, "Wow, I wish I was like so and so," or like, "We have this opportunity to become even better." I like that a lot about this town and the diversity. It's diverse. Even though it's a small town, you get to experience so many different cultures in a good way. You learn to appreciate everybody, you learn to understand everybody, and I think, for the kids, especially, these are my kid's stories. You get to compete and make yourself better based on the [culture] and the ethnicities that you have in your school. When I went to school, there wasn't that many Indians kids. It's not that it was good or bad, because at that point I couldn't communicate with them. But here in Piscataway, you see Indian kids, you see African American kids, you see white kids. You see all these kids at a young age who are all thinking how about, "How can I get into college? How can I get into the AP courses? How can I do this?" They're always thinking ahead of how to be successful later on in life. So, that's something that I love. They learn to understand each other's cultural behavior, and I think that opens an opportunity for them later on.

AC: How many kids do you have?

ME: Three.

AC: Do you ever take them back to …

ME: To Paterson? Yes. Because my mom was there until like six months ago. Every time we went, they'd say, "Oh no, Mommy, I don't want to be here." [laughter]

AC: Looking back, is there anything that you would have done differently?

ME: Yes. When I made the decision to go to school, I chose to go a community college, not because I didn't have the grades to go to a four-year college, but because I didn't have the resources to go to a four-year college. Initially, I wanted to go to William Paterson and do nursing at William Paterson, but I couldn't do it. I didn't really put myself into getting there, because I knew if I would've [gotten] accepted for a four-year college, I needed to be part of the EOF [Educational Opportunity Fund]. That was the only way that I was going to get the resources and the funds to go to school. Being part of EOF, I did almost all the paperwork, but when they told me that I would have to be there during the summer, then I dropped it. I knew that I couldn't leave to go do my cleaning job that I was doing from six to twelve, and if I didn't do the cleaning job, I didn't have anybody who would pay for my car insurance. Who would pay for any of the bills that I was responsible for at my house? Being eighteen years old, that's what made the decision between going to a community college and a four-year college. Do I regret that? Yes, because sometimes I think and ask myself how things could have been different if I would've just followed what I knew I wanted more than just go with what I knew was the only way to do things.

AC: Well, I'm done with my questions, but if you have anything to add, you can say so. Have you gone back to Colombia? Have you traveled anywhere else?

ME: No. Last time I went to Colombia was when I was like twenty-two, and I needed to get my wisdom tooth pulled out. [laughter] It's actually cheaper there, so that was the last time I went there. I got to travel a lot when I was being a babysitter, a lot of islands. I went to Saint James, Saint Thomas, Saint John, the British islands, California, Florida, yes, but it was a different type of traveling, because I wasn't paying for anything, I was just working. Have I gotten the means to travel now with my kids? No. We finally got a Disney vacation. But a lot of people in my town live like they have a lot of money, but I feel like at least I'm giving my kids an opportunity to be at an environment or a place where they could choose their own destiny, that the place [doesn't] make them, but they could build themselves and be who they want to be, unlike me. I had to become who I am or what I am today because of the circumstances that I was presented with. So, that's the difference between then and now, and I think nothing has changed in my life. I do all the things I do because I'm thinking forward to how things could impact my kids. This is one of the biggest reasons that I got this job here, because I have three kids and we don't have college funds. They can always know that they have Mommy, who will be here until they need me to be here, so they could at least have an option to have an education here.

AC: Thank you for sharing.

ME: Well, thank you for interviewing me and for being interested in a little piece of Paterson. I'm not ashamed. If anybody ever asked me where I grew up, I always let them know, because I didn't think that being there and being exposed to all the things that I was exposed [to] made me who I am. I am who I am, and at an early age, I knew I wanted something different, but it definitely made me stronger and not a quitter and knowing that the only way to be successful is to complete things and finish because that's the only way that we could get out of there.

AC: That's true. Well, I am going to conclude it. Do you have anything else?

ME: No, just thank you.

AC: This concludes my interview with Maria Lozano Ealey on Tuesday, June 12, 2018, at 1:50 p.m.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

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