RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH PEDRO JIMENEZ, JR.

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES
and
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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Amy Castillo: Today is November 5, 2019, and it is 5:06 PM. Here I have The Honorable Pedro Jimenez. First, can you state your name and where you were born?

Pedro Jimenez: My name is Pedro Jimenez. I was born in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in 1966.

AC: Can you tell us about where you were raised?

PJ: I was raised in the City of Perth Amboy. At the time that I was raised, it was a smaller, less developed, less crowded community. There was a Latino population there, but it was primarily Hungarian and Polish, Slavic people who lived there, because that's who originally inhabited the town. As years went by and those older people started passing on--their children had already gone on to school and new jobs and they left the town--more and more Latinos kept coming into the city to migrate from wherever, primarily first the Caribbean, Puerto Rico. Then, we had an influx of Dominicans years later and then Mexican, Central American, so that's when the demographics of the town shifted to primarily Latino. I wouldn't be underestimating it if I said maybe sixty, seventy, eighty percent of the town is Latino.

AC: When did you recognize that it started becoming more Latino? What years?

PJ: Probably when I went to college. I went to college from 1984 to 1989. That's when I started seeing more and more Latinos coming into town. Even now, when I started working--after I finished law school--there just seemed like more and more people were migrating to town, and the town was having a little bit of an issue, like keeping up with the number people coming in and providing services for them. Well, now, there's more housing available, but the services being provided to them are falling short in some respects. We still have overcrowded school systems and not enough jobs and stuff like that, but people are making do. Over the past fifteen, twenty years is when the big migration of other Latinos came to Perth Amboy. By other, I mean other than Puerto Rican, because Puerto Ricans were the ones who primarily came and migrated to Perth Amboy.

AC: What can you tell me about your parents and your family growing up?

PJ: Religious to the extent [of] going to church on Sundays. Close-knit family, we pretty much kept to ourselves. We had a small family overall. My father had two brothers and two sisters, who also had families that we would go over to visit on Christmas, holidays, and stuff like that but never really hang out, because we were separated throughout town. My mother, the same way, she had two brothers, and we would go over to their houses a lot and interact probably more with my mother's family than my father's because we were just closer with them, for whatever reason. They were more interactive. It was one of these get up in the morning, go to school, come home, do your homework, and have dinner with the family kind of routine. In the summers, if we didn't travel to Puerto Rico to see our grandparents, then it would be whatever we did as kids in the summer, just to keep ourselves entertained. A very simple life but a good one.

AC: Both of your parents are Puerto Rican?

PJ: Yes.

AC: Are you familiar with their migration story, when they came to the United States?

PJ: They both came over here when they were younger, because their parents had come over to start businesses and move over to try and do better. My mother came over when she was a young girl, as well as my father. He was about six or seven. They had gone back and forth, back and forth to the island, but mostly trying to start a life here. They did high schooling here and grammar school here, and they met each other in high school. My father was a year behind my mother. When my mother graduated, my father dropped out of high school, his last year, to be with my mother, marry my mother.

He ultimately, later, wound up finishing school, GED, and going to Middlesex County College to get some drafting and mechanical drawing certificates, so that he, by trade, became what they called a machinist by trade and, more specifically, a "tool and die maker." They are the guys who could make any tool for any machine you need in order to fix any machine. That was his trade. My mother became a beautician, went to Reignbow Academy, which is a beauty school in Perth Amboy, and then, when she got licensed to be a beautician, worked with another cousin of my father's, who was a licensed beautician, worked in her beauty shop for a couple of years and then, eventually, wound up going out on her own. [She] worked that job for the next twenty years maybe, to the point where she decided to leave it and sell the business and get a job in the school system, just to try and put something away towards some kind of retirement, social security. [She] became a school security guard for about ten years and ultimately retired there with a small pension. Then, my father, working for the state government as well, also retired with a pension from the state government. They just live on my father's investments and the pensions that they have. They saved a ton of money, because back then, it was much easier to save, because the cost of living wasn't that [high]. We as kids didn't require a whole lot, aside from clothes and maybe a ball and glove. There was not much more we had beyond that. There was no Xbox, no computers, no cell phones; none of that stuff existed, to be quite honest. So, that's the kind of life we lived. Aside from summer trips, routine trips, back to Puerto Rico to see our grandparents, we pretty much stayed in Perth Amboy.

AC: Your parents grew up in Perth Amboy?

PJ: For the most part. After elementary and high school, they did. They kept going back and forth, depending on the needs of their parents, to the island, to stay with other family members or do what they had to do. My mother, when she first came here, was living with one of my grandfather's brothers in Hoboken. My father wound up living with his mom who was here, his grandfather coming over later. The migration was slow; it was piecemeal. It wasn't a big family migration. Every brother and every sister came over one at a time. My father's older brother, actually, was sent to Chicago to stay with my father's oldest sister, who had married and relocated there. That way, they could get all acclimated here to the States, and then, eventually, everybody regrouped and wound up establishing families and homes in Perth Amboy.

AC: Your parents were the first generation to come over.

PJ: Oh, yes, oh, yes. They were the first ones. My grandparents were all born and raised and grew up and worked [in Puerto Rico], and it wasn't until they were a little older, maybe '40s or '50s, that they finally came over to the States to start the life that they were going to start. My grandfather, [on] my mother's side, came over to be a field hand in the summertime, to work the fields in Vineland. That's why they would bring my mother over, but she would wind up being in Hoboken. So, that's like opposite ends of the state. My father's father came over and took odd jobs, factory worker kind of jobs, and had everybody come over little by little as well, you know, the traditional kind of migration and the traditional kind of jobs that you read about in all these old Puerto Rican studies books that you read about and you grew up on.

AC: What do you remember about visiting Puerto Rico when you went in the summers?

PJ: It was free, free in the sense that you were so unrestricted, in air, in quality, in people, in food. It was just a freedom like nothing else. Now, granted, I was a little kid, so I had nothing to worry about from ages six through twelve or thirteen. Living with my grandparents, they had a farm, they had a house. I went and hung out with my grandfather just to learn how to work with the animals because it was fun, but [I would] just come and go. Mostly, it was me that went, because my sister was still too young. When she got older, she was sent as well, but for the most part, it was me. Immersed in the culture, I got to continue to keep my language, even though I don't speak it as well as I should. If you don't speak it routinely, you just forget simple things, and then when you do speak it, you'll have something of an accent, because you're working on English so much that you don't keep a balance.

At the time when I was growing up, the schools that I went to, I spoke Spanish before I spoke English, and then I had to flip and learn English but to a degree where the teachers were telling my parents, "Don't speak to Pedro …" they called me Peter back then, "Don't speak to Peter in Spanish. Speak to him in English." Now, my parents knew English, but my father spoke with an accent, and my mother spoke better English. I was immersed in the English culture to try and learn it. One of the ways my father taught me how to understand and read English was by reading comic books, which was how he learned. That's why I developed a strong affinity for comic books and action heroes and superheroes and that kind of stuff.

The school that I grew up in, that I went to, the elementary school, was also a little bit unfriendly towards Latino people. So, there was a little extra that I had to deal with growing up about why I was always uncomfortable every day in school, when other kids weren't. It wasn't until later that I learned that some of the teachers I had to deal with [had] a little anti-Latino tendency about themselves. I didn't know that until my father and mother told me later.

AC: This was only in elementary school that you felt like that.

PJ: This was in the elementary school, yes. We were so religious that my father put me in a Catholic school, because he thought a Catholic school had a better education. So, I went to a school in town called Our Lady of Hungary, which was Roman Catholic, Hungarian. I had to go to church as part of the school curriculum every Friday morning, we all went as a group, I had to go on Sundays, and they taught religion. So, I got to learn about the religion. The two best things I got out of it was, I have good penmanship--they really focused in on you being able to

write--and for some reason, there was an emphasis on math. So, I'm better at math than I am at most. I don't know why. So, that's the benefits I got out of Catholic school, plus the discipline. Obviously, I learned how to behave, not that I was a wild kid, but I learned have to behave, conduct myself, sit straight, "Yes, sir. No, sir," polite, that kind of stuff. I learned that primarily out of fear, because if I didn't act that way, then I would get punished, like my other Latino classmates, of which there were three or four of them out of a class of like fifteen.

AC: In your elementary school?

PJ: In my elementary school. We stayed together every year as we went through, and we picked up two or three more kids along the way. I think in the end, the most we ever had were maybe six Spanish guys, maybe one or two Spanish girls, mostly all Puerto Rican. One kid was Peruvian, but, yes, I don't know how he slipped in there.

AC: Did you feel a change in the population when you went from elementary school to middle school and then to high school?

PJ: Well, I never went to middle school. My school was first grade through eighth grade, and then from eighth grade, you went to high school.

AC: How was that transition?

PJ: That was really interesting, because you go from a very structured [environment]--you had to wear the same uniform, the same people all day every day, same classroom, same teacher each year--to you go into high school, well, now you have to go to different classes with different classmates and different teachers, and it was on your own. You had to find your way through the building, and you get to dress in whatever you want. Then, since you don't come from the public school system--the majority of kids who were at the high school were from the public school system, so they knew each other for years--I had to make friends all over again. Because I was a clean-cut kid, hair combed to the side, glasses, kind of geeky looking, you would suffer getting picked on. What I had to my benefit though was I was athletic. I was fast, I was strong, I was a little bit huskier. So, I really wouldn't get picked on too much, because either I could run away from people and they couldn't catch me, or I was big enough to be able to overpower them if they tried anything. I was still quiet and shy, and that's who they pick on the most.

AC: Do you remember being around a lot of Latinos when you got to high school?

PJ: Yes. That's when it really struck me, "Holy moley, there's tons of Spanish kids here and Black kids." When I went to elementary school, there wasn't one Black kid who was in my class. It was not until freshman year of high school that I went to class with my first Black student and there was a Chinese student as well and Black girls. There were no Black girls in my school in elementary school. You had to pay for elementary school. There was tuition. My father thought it was a better education. The diversity of the high school was what overwhelmed me, and it was really nice to experience that because the majority of the people were from poor backgrounds, just getting along and very cool, so you fit in.

AC: Do you recall any problems that Puerto Rico was undergoing while you were growing up?

PJ: No. Aside from the independence movement, which was always a small contingency and primarily fueled by people here in the States, it was still the same old commonwealth kind of situation, where the U.S. would control what was going on and you had the infighting between the reds and the blues. [Editor's Note: Reds refers to members of the Popular Democratic Party, or *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD). Blues refers to supporters of the New Progressive Party, *Partido Nuevo Progresista* (PNP).] People would get in, and then once one party would get in, they would take care of all their friends, and then they would lose, and then another party [would do the same]. It was never really geared towards developing the island, developing the people, establishing a consistent system of government that benefited everyone. It was just about, "We're under the control of the U.S. We've got to run everything by them. We can't do our own trade. We can't have our own businesses. So, let's get into these political positions and bring our friends, so that way we can get a salary," but that's nothing really out of the ordinary. I think the few incidents that they had, the Los Macheteros incidents and the armored car robbery, out of Connecticut, to fund the independence movement, I think that happened still when I was a little kid.

AC: Do you remember anything about that?

PJ: To fund some of the independence movement activities here--so the story goes, I mean, this is what I read from the books--there was a group of people, a small group, very tiny, that robbed an armored car, a Brinks--I believe it was a Brinks armored car--in Connecticut. I think one of the main characters was a gentleman by the name of Victor Gerena, and this is what I'm reading from the books and stories. Well, they robbed an armored car in a well-organized armored car robbery, took the money, left the car, and the money was never found. The people who committed the robbery were never found, and that money was apparently used to fund, so they say, the independence movement here, some of the activities here. A group of Puerto Ricans, New York and Chicago, were using that money to fund whatever activities they were engaged in, to try and raise the awareness of the plight of Puerto Rico as a colony, to try and motivate people to move for independence. [Editor's Note: The Águila Blanca heist was a robbery of a Well Fargo depot in West Hartford, Connecticut on September 12, 1983. Wells Fargo employee Victor Gerena stole over seven million dollars in order fund the operations of Los Macheteros, a Puerto Rican nationalist organization. Gerena has never been apprehended. The Brinks robbery took place on October 20, 1981, when members of the Black Liberation Army and Weather Underground robbed a Brink's armored car in Nanuet, New York.]

AC: Were your parents or grandparents involved politically?

PJ: No, not in Puerto Rican politics or anything like that, aside from the usual, they'd get together with their groups and talk about the island and stuff. But my father became more involved politically in my hometown. He ran for the Board of Education. Both my parents were highly intelligent, my mother more gifted in math and handwriting and my father more gifted in politics and history. For example, we ordered the *World Book Encyclopedias*, the whole collection, and my father read them all, from page one of "A" to the last page of "Z," plus all the supplements. He could remember things like nobody's business. Even when he was growing up

as a kid, he was very good at books and history. He could remember, for every country in the world--he was very good at history--but he would remember the capital of every country in the world, their primary export and their primary imports, and what the population of that country was and the political infrastructure of that country. That's how good he was in history and very well read. He read both in English and in Spanish, all the political people, from Aristotle, Socrates to Eugenio María de Hostos, names that I'm forgetting now that, I'm embarrassed that I should remember them, but it is not coming to me, because I'm feeling the pressure right now. [laughter] [My father read] all the famous Puerto Rican historians, all the Latin American writers.

He got into politics, because he was one of the few people in our town, growing up, who was young, was able to do it, because my mother was supportive of it. She could take care of the kids at home while he was out being involved. He felt the need for it, there needed to be a representation. He was one of the few who were relatively bilingual and certainly smarter than a lot of politicians who were in public office already. He became one of the first Latinos involved in politics in Perth Amboy. So, he [ran for] the Board of Education, he lost that election. Because he worked hard for the Democratic Party, they brought him onto a council ticket, and he ran for council along with others. He got on the council, was there for years, became president of the city council. At some point, [he] got sworn in as mayor when our mayor abandoned the post, as part of a recall movement. [He] became the first [Latino] mayor of the town and became very politically active with regards to serving on the council for years thereafter, as well as helping other politicians, county and statewide, gain political office, as being somebody who could walk them through the town and collect votes, so extremely, extremely active.

AC: Was your father a large influence in your going into the law?

PJ: Absolutely, absolutely, primarily because there was an incident in Perth Amboy in the mid '80s, late '80s, where there was a shooting of two Mexican men in a bar by an unarmed police officer who had a history of anti-Latino violence or racial violence attached to him. One thing led to another with this off-duty police officer who shot these two men and killed them. An investigation ensued. The town started rioting because they had had enough of this police abuse that they had been subjected to. My father got involved with trying to turn the riots into a protest march. In the end, they sought answers from local law enforcement, from the county prosecutor's office about why these guys weren't charged, etcetera, etcetera. The thing that my father faced from the powers that be, especially the local law enforcement, was they just ignored him, because he spoke with an accent, and so they didn't take him seriously.

That fueled me to say, "Okay, I'm going to go to law school. I'm going to get a law degree, and then when I come back, since you don't want to talk to my father, you're going to talk to me. He's put me in a position to understand English a little better, he's put me in a position to get a law degree, and so now you're going to have to deal with me." His political activities, his commitment to public service, how he wanted to help the town, especially the community, advance, and his fierce protection of people in town from being taken advantage of by local government and law enforcement, that fueled me to have that same kind of ideology. Now, I say that not to say that it made me a leftist, liberal progressive or a right-wing conservative; it just put me in a place where I had to use abilities, my education, and skillset to make sure that the

system worked for the people who it was supposed to work for, those most underprivileged. At that time, it was the Latino community, because though it was a large group, there wasn't [representation], and another reason I went to law school is because there was maybe one or two lawyers who could actually speak on behalf of the community.

AC: Was there any other anti-Latino violence that happened while you were growing up?

PJ: Growing up routinely. You can't even call it violence; you just call it a way of life. You would be riding in certain neighborhoods, and the police would come by and say, "Get out of here. You don't belong here." A funny story is that where I live now in Perth Amboy is close to the waterfront. Well, that's where all the older, rich white people used live. So, I would ride through the waterfront, because I wanted to go to the waterfront and be by the water. They had a hot dog stand; they had a playground there. To get there, I'd had to ride through the communities. Well, I live in one of those houses now. But this was the same area, when I was a little kid, where a police officer wouldn't let me go through because I didn't belong there. I belonged on the other side of town. The people just didn't want us riding through their neighborhoods, because if we couldn't ride through the neighborhoods, we couldn't go to their beach, their beach. So, their beach would remain pristine and free of Puerto Rican kids just enjoying the water. Every day, it was a hassle. You would get a smack, they would kick your bike. Whatever kind of force they could use to "move you along" because you don't belong there, they would.

AC: Was that force ever directly used on you?

PJ: On me, no, because I was a quiet kid. The minute they told me to get moving, I was afraid, I just got moving. The one thing my father told me was, "Whenever they tell you to move, move. Don't talk back to them. It's just going to create problems. Come tell me, and I'll figure out what to do. I'd rather you're here with me and out of that situation than respond to that situation and be somewhere where I can't help you, whether you get beaten up by the cops, or, God forbid, hospitalized or something like that."

AC: How did you decide what you wanted to do post high school graduation? Was college always your goal?

PJ: Yes, going to college was--there was no question--my father was adamant about I was going to college. To do what? He left it up to me. I went to college. I went to Rutgers primarily because I wanted to play football. I really didn't care much about academics. I figured I'd come play football, get some kind of degree, and be good enough then to go to the NFL, at least tryout. Well, I got injured my first year, had to focus on my schooling, went from engineering into Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean studies, because I was fascinated by history. Back then, it was called Puerto Rican Studies. Then, they changed it to Puerto Rican and Hispanic Studies. Then, they changed it to Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies. Then, at some point, it became Puerto Rican and Latino Studies, and at this point, I don't even know what it's called.

AC: It is my major. It is Latino and Caribbean Studies.

PJ: Latino and Caribbean Studies. So there it is. It's gone through eight different changes because that department was also in turmoil as well. They had some good professors who really understood the curriculum and really taught you about it from all levels. I wanted to learn about the Caribbean and where I was from because I was a history major, plus I dabbled in English to develop a skillset, and because I was fascinated by it. I learned the history of Puerto Rico, the history of Santo Domingo [Dominican Republic], and the history of Cuba, the three primary countries, to see how they interact. The history of [Dominican Republic] Santo Domingo was involved with the history of Haiti, of course, out of necessity. In studying all three of those, you would always get the history of Spain, because you would get to understand how Spain related to the three of them. So, basically, it was a true understanding of the history of the Caribbean, minus the Lesser Antilles, not so much Jamaica, Antigua, and that kind of stuff. The only thing that I was not able to complete was a "History of Mexico" course that they had taught. Now, I don't think they teach any of those courses, except for maybe "History of Cuba."

AC: Professor Lilia Fernandez teaches Mexican-American history.

PJ: Okay.

AC: I do not remember the professor that teaches "History of Cuba," but I took it. There is Latino American history.

PJ: Okay. See, there was just the straight--"History of Puerto Rico" was the history of Puerto Rico.

AC: They do not offer that course.

PJ: Wow, and it's a shame. That department was first created by Latino students on Livingston Campus who wanted to learn about their own culture, their own studies. They just didn't want to learn about history. If you want to talk about revolutionaries, the revolutionaries were really the people here on Livingston Campus, the Puerto Rican students here, who essentially forced Rutgers to create that Puerto Rican Studies Department. That's what it was called, Puerto Rican Studies, and it started back in the '60s. They just kept evolving it, as I indicated with the different titles, and adding to it and bringing in professors.

When I was there, it was kind of at the point where they had still a lot of great professors who were still associated with the movement that created the department, Harry Rodríguez, Jose Morales, brilliant individual, well published, Andrés Pérez y Mena, Cuban, well published, could talk about not only culture but also the religious components, because he comes from a family of *santeros*. We had Pedro Cabán, who was a little bit of a controversial figure. He wasn't as leftist and as liberal as people wanted him to be, at least so they say, but [a] very intelligent individual, well read, fantastic. We had a gentleman by the name of Tato Laviera, from New York, who talked about the music of our culture. This guy was--I'm sure he was a musician, I'm sure he was part of some musical group, but he would come and teach us about the music of our culture, from *bomba, plena,* from African origins, all three islands primarily, and then how it affected the rest of Central and Latin America. There's one or two teachers who I know I'm forgetting, but it was a star-studded lineup of professors who were here basically on an adjunct basis, except for two or

three of them, who we had the benefit of. After I left, they all wound up leaving as well. [Editor's Note: *Santero* is a priest in the African diasporic religion Santería, which is also known as the Order of the Orishas or Lucumí.]

Being a part of that program and getting a chance to talk to Professor Harry Rodríguez--who I think now is a professor at Hunter College and still teaches there--he was the one who kind of asked me to think about going to law school because I'm a pretty good talker. The reason why he came to that was because I would have "History of Puerto Rico," his class, at one-thirty Mondays and Thursdays, but I was always late for his class. To my shame, I had no class on those days before that. I was just freaking lazy. I would go to the gym, go to lunch for like four hours, and then saunter over to his class. Every day, he would ask me, "Why are you late to my class?" and every day I would have kind of story to give him. I think he called me a "*buen hablador*" [good talker]. So, I'm like, "All right, I'll figure that out one day." [laughter] He told me, "You have an ability to respond. You have an ability to articulate ideas, even though some of it is bullshit. So, your ability to articulate what you're thinking, after being confronted with a situation, leads me to think that you should probably explore law school, and there's a law school that I want you to apply to."

That's how he turned me onto Northeastern in Boston, where I ultimately went to law school. It was a very leftist, progressive law school, started by Harvard law graduates who wanted to develop a different way of teaching. They didn't want to do the Socratic method. They wanted to have a more clinical global approach to teaching the students the way that they do at college. So, they're the ones who started that. They, in their revolutionary mentalities, started Northeastern.

I went from one revolutionary program, the Puerto Rican Studies Program, to another, which is Northeastern, and it was Harry Rodríguez who got me started in that direction. Plus, I was graduating with just a Puerto Rican Studies degree, and--no offense to anybody who graduates with it--but there's not much I can do with it. So, I said, "Well, I'm going to go to law school. Why not?" One thing led to another, I guess it was destiny for me to go there, because they wound up giving me a full scholarship to go, so I went. Consistent with Harry Rodríguez's observation that I was a *buen hablador,* I'm convinced that I was able to get the scholarship--I took a visit to the law school with a friend of mine, Luis Tejada. If you ever get a hold of this guy, Luis Tejada's father was one of Trujillo's national guardsmen, because his father was very good looking and had green eyes. According to what Luis and his father would tell me, Trujillo wanted to have a squad of personal guardsmen who were the best-looking men with the best eyes. [Editor's Note: Rafael Trujillo was the dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961.]

AC: I had heard of that, but you have confirmed it. [laughter]

PJ: His father was one of them. I'm going to have to give you his number; you're going to have to call Luis. You want to talk about getting oral histories and one that could deal with specifically the Dominican migration, this is the guy. You have to talk to him.

AC: I would love to.

PJ: Okay, I'm going to give you his number before I go.

AC: What classes do you vividly remember from Puerto Rican Studies?

PJ: From Rutgers? "History of Puerto Rico." "History of Dominican Republic," that's what it was called, with Jose Morales. There wasn't a "History of Cuba" class. It was "History of the Caribbean." That's what it was. That's where they picked up Cuba and everything else. All my classes with Andrés Pérez y Mena, he had a class specifically dealing with the religious aspects of our culture. Tato Laviera's class, which was Thursday nights. It was basically, you would come in, you would literally learn about *bomba, plena, salsa, cumbia, merengue,* everything. You would learn about the notes that were associated with each type of music and the dance steps and what the dance steps meant and where all of it originated from, which I was fascinated by and sometimes found a little unbelievable, especially when he told me that *merengue* was created by a guy who had a peg leg and went to a party one day and just danced. He had a peg leg, he would move with his left and drag his right, and that's how *merengue* was created. I'm like, "Come on, bro. That's crazy," but when you really think about it, I'm like, "Yes, it makes sense. Somebody with a peg leg, this is the move."

I just loved it, because you could talk to them not only about what they were there to teach, but you could talk to them about history. Andrés Pérez y Mena, for example, was part of the Young Lords movement, and there was somebody who you could actually touch who was part of that movement. As my generation and--I'm assuming you're younger than me--your generation, we've lost that, because we can't really pinpoint or say that I was at least one degree separated from somebody who was involved in that movement. I'm one degree separated from somebody who was part of Trujillo's guard, so I know the history of Trujillo. Those are the courses that I remember, but just the experience of being part of the group and the constant battle that you had to go through every year, as a student of that program, to make sure that the University wouldn't shut it down. The University was always trying to shut it down and have it absorbed into the History Department, and so we fought that.

AC: Can you elaborate on fighting that and how you fought that?

PJ: We were all really good students and had really good grades, and we were all model citizens, for the most part. Between Lambda Theta Phi, Lambda Theta Alpha, Latin Images [Living-Learning Community], Latino organizations that existed, we just confronted the University and said we weren't going to have that. There's just no reason. We made pitches and proposals as to why we couldn't do that, because the History Department couldn't sustain that, what we had. We had twelve, thirteen classes, eight of which were standard classes. The others were sometimes extras that we would get, because we would have somebody famous come and teach. We would have at least eight or nine solid classes that were taught every year by these professors, who most of them were part-time lecturers. They weren't full-time staff members at Rutgers. That was another problem, trying to get a Latino professor to be a full-time tenured professor at Rutgers. That effort was a nightmare. It certainly didn't occur while I was here. So, it was a constant to and fro. We did whatever we could, whether we guilted them, threatened them, whatever, or to out them as anti-Latino. We just kept them at bay, because if it wasn't the

Puerto Rican Studies Program, it was the Latin Images program that they also wanted to get rid of as well.

AC: I was a part of that, my freshman and sophomore year.

PJ: Well, I was there for three out of the five years, and that was a movement that we had to fight as well. That was, for me, the best time ever. That was the greatest transition from where I came from to Rutgers. So, it was a constant effort against the system and the administration to keep what we had alive, because it was handed down to us from others who started it and built it. We had to keep it, we had to expand it, we had to solidify it, we had to show that it was worth it, and by doing that, we all had to get great grades and move on to alumni status, where we'd become reputable alumni, so that way they knew that, "There's a group of graduates who are going to have influence on us." Not only are the students dealing with this battle now--they took it on after us--we also have alumni who are coming back to make sure that the University wouldn't do away with these programs. The Society for Hispanic Engineers, for example, we had a great number of Hispanic students--my roommate and best friend, Edgar Sandoval, was one of the presidents--and that was a great group ...

AC: Still is.

PJ: … Of Latinos. They were kick-ass then--I imagine they are kick-ass now--because they were essentially the cream of the crop, because there wasn't one Latino involved in that group who was an engineer who was not anything but an "A/A+" student. We gave credibility to the University in other aspects. So, that also helped us keep our momentum with regards to the Puerto Rican Studies Program, keeping that alive.

AC: Do you remember the administration from the department?

PJ: Harry Rodríguez was one of the people, though he wasn't the head of the department, he was kind of one the people who helped organize it. Then, Jose Morales came in, because at that point, Harry Rodríguez had just gone back to Hunter, because he was tired of teaching here. The main person, the main focus, of the program was Vilma Perez, who was the secretary. I believe she was Guatemalan. She knew everything about the program, she kept everybody in check, she knew everything, and she was the liaison with the administration, because at one point, they didn't have a department head. The department head was somebody over in the History Department, who was kind of acting. So, it was a very, very strange time. It was only when they brought this guy, Pedro Cabán, in to finally make him a department head that they actually had a department head. Even then, we never really were sure whether or not he actually had full-time professor status or not. So, we were in flux for the four or five years that I was here. I was here five years. That entire time, the department was in a state of flux with regards to leadership. I seriously cannot recall who the head of the department was. I don't think we had one. It was only at the end, like maybe my fourth or fifth year, when I was done with the curriculum and I was preparing to go to law school, that they finally installed, I think, Pedro Cabán as the head of the department. I know he was there after I left. Vilma was pretty much just running the show.

AC: Do you recall any struggles or adversity that happened around Rutgers involving people of color or immigrants?

PJ: Well, back then, we had problems with tuition hikes. Back then, we had some--in the Demarest area, across from Frelinghuysen--issues with regards to gay and lesbian individuals. There used to be a third floor of Demarest Hall that I had heard was a special interest, because there was a lot of special interest housing back then. So, there was a special interest section for gay and lesbian men and women. Sometimes, they had problems because the way that area is set up, you go up a staircase across from Frelinghuysen and it's buildings that encircle a courtyard, but it was a dark courtyard. A lot of the residents would get jumped in the dark and get beaten up. There were the issues with regards to that.

[There were] issues with regards to the plight of Puerto Rico. There was a lot of very progressive-thinking individuals, I mean, really far-left, progressive-thinking individuals, that would take up certain issues and turn them into movements, a great deal of them. I couldn't even begin to list them.

One of the easiest ones was the newspaper *Black Voice*/*Carta Boricua*. It was a newspaper that existed back then that at some point, it switched titles. It went from *Carta Boricua*/*Black Voice* to *Black Voice*/*Carta Boricua*, and there was an issue with regards to that. Why was it *Black Voice* first and *Carta Boricua* second, when it originally started that way? So, there was a little division or friction there between the African-American and Latino community, not nothing so heavy, but at least enough to start a conversation. [Editor's Note: The Black Voice/*Carta Latina*, or BVCL, is a student-run newspaper at Rutgers University. In 1985, its name was changed from the Black Voice/*Carta Boricua* to the Black Voice/*Carta Latina*.]

There was the Rutgers *Targum*, with regards to how they reported Latino issues--which was slim to none--and people of Black and Latino backgrounds being part of the reporting or the administration at the Rutgers *Targum*. The number of professors on campus who were Hispanic, which were none. Those were the kind of issues that we were dealing with back then. But what we had back then that helped was the Latino sorority and fraternity system, which was very strong back then and in deep, deep numbers.

AC: I'm in a multicultural sorority, and it's not the same.

PJ: Oh, okay. Well, back then, Lambda Theta Alpha was the Latinas, and you couldn't mess with them. They had their shit in gear, a very powerful, motivated group. Lambda Theta Phi, the male version of them. Then, there was another Latino fraternity, Lambda …

AC: Lambda Sigma Upsilon?

PJ: Lambda Sigma Upsilon. Light blue and white. They kind of rejuvenated over here on Livingston Campus. So, there was big groups that were starting, and at some point after I left, then they all got together and became a Latino Student Council, an umbrella organization. So, they organized. SHE [Society of Hispanic Engineers] was also part of that as well. We also, on some level, began a Latino Pre-Law Society for those of us who were going to law school, and it

was just a couple of us. We were trying to get it off the ground, because Rutgers had a pre-law society, but they didn't really include us. They still didn't think that, because we didn't have the "3.9" grade point average, that we were going to law school. I remember I had a dean tell me to my face because of my grade point average, "You'll never get into law school. You'll never be a lawyer. So, you've got to go do something else." I know who that dean is. I [am not] going to call him out, because at some point, he was kind of friendly to the community later on. He retired, so I'm just going to leave it be. You would have that kind of response--I don't want to say resistant response--from the faculty.

AC: What were you involved with specifically?

PJ: No, I was more support, because between playing football and getting my grades together and focusing in on law school, I didn't really want to take a leadership role because others wanted to. So, I'm like, "Great, you want to do it? I'll support you one hundred percent." So, I was more of a behind-the-scenes, labor kind of guy helping people. To be quite honest, I was physically bigger, stronger and faster because of all the years I spent doing athletics. So, I was part of a group of guys that would serve as the muscle to protect our Latino people when they ever went out and got harassed by others. Though we lived on the floor, we were the subject to retaliation and harassment all the time. From people dropping stuff and garbage on our floor, or egging our floor, egging our windows, or we'd be walking somewhere and groups would say something, there was still a lot of racial friction. You still had some--I don't want to call them Nazi or white [supremacist] kind of people walking around, but you had them. They would still cause you trouble, and for whatever reason, many of them lived across in the Demarest area. We had to walk through there all the time, day or night, to go to Brower Commons, to go to the Student Center, so we would walk in groups. One of the things I started doing was I made sure that when I would get back from class, at four or five o'clock, I'd go up and down the hallways of Latin Images and be like, "All right, we going to dinner? Let's go to dinner. Come on, let's go to eat. Everybody, let's go eat." So, we would roll over there fifteen deep, men and women, to go eat together as a group. Whether we sat at Brower Commons together or not, we at least went there as a group and waited and came back as a group in shifts, because then it was dark and we just wanted to make sure that nobody was walking alone. So, that's the kind of roles that I played, myself and my roommate and a couple other guys.

AC: What difficulties did you face trying to get into law school?

PJ: None, none. Just taking the test and applying. It was a different time back then. Latinos were not going to law school in a whole bunch of numbers, and even if you had decent grades, you could get in. The one thing that I had was--I had average grades. I mean, I graduated with like a "2.9," "3.0," but in my Puerto Rican Studies Program, I had like a "3.8." I aced that. So, then, I had to talk about that in my application and interview process, and back then, they just don't look at your overall grade, they look at what you were doing. I had progressed from getting mediocre grades to getting "A's" and "B's" over time. That, coupled with the fact that the LSAT [Law School Admission Test] that I took--the way it was scored back then--I scored very high on it. I scored very high on it. I mean, I think the highest you could score back then was a forty-two, and I got like a thirty-six or a thirty-eight, which for a Latino was extraordinary. Then, I had a lot of activities, Latin Images and the department. I was also a teacher's aide,

because Andrés Pérez y Mena allowed me to help teach classes because of my understanding of the material and my success with the grade work. I was also a member of a white fraternity, Chi Phi fraternity. I say white, but I became a member of that fraternity because there was at least eight or nine of us who joined there and they just kept recruiting, "Hey, you've got to come over and join this fraternity." We had a bunch of Cubans there from Union City, and they said, "You've got to come over here and be part of us." I did, and that's why we always had the best parties because we had the best music. [laughter] I took the prep courses, I studied for it, I prepared myself for it, and I got lucky, because anytime we accomplish something, there has to be a level of luck associated with it. So, I got in and I got into a couple, but Northeastern's the one who came through with that money.

AC: You chose Northeastern because of the scholarship that they gave you.

PJ: I did, I did. I was going to law school for free. I actually liked the law schools in Boston. I liked the way they taught, but the fact that they gave me a full-tuition aid grant, you can't beat that, and so I went.

AC: What was the population of students in your school and in your classes?

PJ: At Northeastern?

AC: Yes.

PJ: We had 180 students in my freshman class, sixty-five percent of which were women. Forty percent of that sixty-five were lesbian women, because they were very progressive and they were very welcoming of gay-lesbian people in the community. Back then, they didn't talk about transsexual, there wasn't GLB, wasn't any of that.

AC: LGBTQ.

PJ: There wasn't any of those. You were either gay or you were a lesbian or altogether homosexual. There wasn't bisexual, transgender, none of that, at least outwardly. I'm sure they existed because those people just didn't show up, but they kept it quiet. The only people that people readily acknowledged publicly were gay and lesbian as a group. You got lumped into it, which was both good because at least you got to have some recognition and services, but was also terrible because I'm quite certain somebody who's transgender has different needs than someone who's a lesbian, and they have different needs from a gay male, and if you're bisexual, you have different needs from everybody. At least now it's expanded to be a little bit more progressive in outreach and in thinking, but back then, that's all it was. That's what Northeastern was.

AC: Were there Latinos around you? Did you see other Latinos around you?

PJ: There was six of us.

AC: In your whole freshmen class?

PJ: In my freshmen class, from all over the country. Two people from Texas, me from Jersey, and three people from New York. So, there were six of us, and we all survived. We all made it through, all went on to do good things.

AC: Did you face any difficulties as a Latino man in law school?

PJ: In law school, not so much. You still had some issues with regards to non-Latino individuals, Caucasians, even at Northeastern, who may have had issues with your name, or your accent, or how you spoke, or whatever, or your orientation, but not so much, not so much. Not like what you're faced with when you're in the legal profession.

AC: How did your parents or family feel when you decided to become a lawyer or to go to law school?

PJ: My father thought it was just par for the course. Getting more education, especially now since I didn't cost him much of anything, was great. The idea of having a son as a lawyer and going to law school was something he could talk about and was proud of. My mother just wanted me to do what I wanted to do, make sure I like it, make sure I eat, and that I took care of myself.

AC: Were you involved in anything regarding Latinos in law school?

PJ: Yes, the only group that was available back then was LALSA, the Latino American Law Students Association. So, I held a position there, because there were so few of us. I think at one point I became the president or whatever, but you just do it and moved on. I was also on some other advisory committees for the law school, but I really wasn't as active. I didn't get as active and I'm still not--even now in my profession--I'm not so much active in leadership by being on certain committees; I'm active in leadership by just being who I am, doing the work that I do, and setting the example, being the role model. Over the years, I've been able to accomplish that much more effectively than being a president of a board or a secretary of a board. Once you have a reputation, a good one, people will remember you, mostly because they're looking for you to fail, but they never see you fall. They see you just continue to make progress and setting standards and making good decisions, and so they gain more and more respect for you, to the point then where your word is as good as bond and they come to you for advice, regardless of the fact that I'm younger than most.

AC: What types of law have you practiced throughout your career?

PJ: Criminal, civil, landlord-tenant. Civil has a whole bunch, personal injury, suing people for negligence, that kind of stuff.

AC: Were there many Latinos in the legal field when you started?

PJ: No, no, there weren't, very few, very few. Just in my town alone, there may have been, by the time I became a lawyer, there may have been, what, four or five.

AC: In Perth Amboy?

PJ: In Perth Amboy alone.

AC: Have you only practiced law in Perth Amboy?

PJ: No. When my career started, I got into public service. I became a law clerk for a year, and then I became a prosecutor here in the county, because I wanted to do criminal work. So, I applied for the public defender's office or the prosecutor's office, because if you wanted to do criminal, those are the only two places you could apply to. The public defenders didn't hire me; the prosecutor did. So, I took the prosecutor's position. When I took that position in 1993, I became the first Latino prosecutor that Middlesex County ever had, ever had. So, I stayed there for five years working trials, juvenile, adult trials, that kind of stuff.

Then, I went to the Attorney General's Office, because I wanted to do a different kind of work and make more money. When I went and got hired by the Attorney General's Office, the state prosecutor's office, the Division of Criminal Justice, I had learned that I became probably only the second Latino that they ever hired there. There may have been one guy who was hired before me to work in the Division of Criminal Justice, but nobody could really remember. At the time that I was there--I was there for a total of eleven years, ten years--for the first six or seven years, I was the only Latino working for the Attorney General's Office in the Division of Criminal Justice, which is the state prosecutor's office. We prosecuted cases all throughout the state. I was the only Latino they had there.

AC: What challenges did you face being the only Latino there?

PJ: Having to prove yourself as being somebody who belonged, not only in your office, but when you went to different courts. There were many a court that I went to--whether municipal or state--that I would walk into the courtroom, and I would get seated at the defendant's chair, because they thought I was a defendant. So, I would just sit at the defendant's chair until court started. Then, when they brought the defendant in and when the judge came out, "Who's here on behalf of the state?" I would say, "Your honor, I'm here. Pedro Jimenez, Deputy Attorney General on behalf of the state." The judge would say, "Well, why are you sitting there? That's the defendant's chair." I'm like, "Well, that's where that officer told me to sit. I didn't want to question law enforcement, because it's my first time here. So I do as I'm told." That would send a message to them that, "You screwed up." The judge would get the idea, but he would appreciate the fact that I'm not making a cause out of it. Then, he would say, "Deputy, you sit him over here next time." That was it. I had to do that in a number of different courtrooms that I went through. In that small way, that's how I changed people's minds in that courtroom. That's how I made a difference on that day, which then--it certainly made a difference in that courtroom every day I went because they remembered me--from then on, I can't believe that officer ever assumed that somebody Latino was going to be the defendant.

AC: I saw in your pre-interview survey that you worked with Martin Perez. [Editor's Note: Martin Perez is a 1986 graduate of the Rutgers School of Law in Newark. He served on Rutgers University's Board of Governors from 2013 to 2021.]

PJ: Martin Perez is a mentor of mine. He's my father's lawyer. I spent the summer working with him. I'm very close with him and his wife. To this day, he still is somebody who I can lean on for advice and stuff. Martin was primarily a lawyer in New Brunswick, and I got to meet him through my father, when my father was part of a community activist group called Visions of Tomorrow. That was originally started by my cousin, Jay Jimenez, as a community group--born out of those riots--to be focused in on addressing all kinds of our needs in the City of Perth Amboy, and then it expanded to try and get county wide. Martin was kind of part of a group in New Brunswick that was existing back then, became involved in this group, and then, eventually, developed the Latino Leadership Alliance, which is an umbrella organization that encompasses a lot of Latino community-based organizations throughout the state, so that the Latino Leadership Alliance can speak for them and make the connections and unify everybody together for the same cause. I don't think Martin's involved in it anymore. I think he had to give that up, because he holds a seat on the Rutgers Governors Board.

AC: Do you remember working on anything specifically with Martin Perez?

PJ: Just different criminal cases. I would go to court with him, and I got a chance to learn what it is to do the grunt work that you need to do as a lawyer and also be exposed to what we as a community are exposed to, both on the municipal court level and the Superior Court, with regards to charges and stuff like that. He did some civil work, so I learned about what they were involved in with regards to suing, divorces, landlord-tenant, that kind of stuff.

AC: What is the most significant case that you remember trying as a lawyer?

PJ: Trying as a lawyer? For me, they were all significant, because they involved a victim, but I think the one that I remember most was when I got to the AG's Office. I had to try this guy who was a business owner, Richard Pessolano, who had this company--I forgot specifically what company made--but he hired a lot of people to work with him, a lot of whom were Latinos. What he was doing was, when he would pay them, he would deduct from their salary--as he had to under the state law--both the taxes that he had to turn over to the state and the money for unemployment insurance that you'd have to turn over to the state, so that if these individuals ever became unemployed, they would have unemployment insurance. Well, he was keeping that money. He was deducting it from them, but he was keeping it. Essentially, he was robbing them. I tried the case. He wound up being convicted. He was an old man, he wound up going to jail for a bunch of years, but I said to myself, "It's important, because you're standing up to somebody who is robbing the poor people. If I don't do this, they're never going to see their money." Back then, there was a lot of people who were non-U.S. citizens and it wasn't a big deal back then to be a non-U.S. citizen, but they had no other recourse. Not only was I able to convict him, but I was able to recoup the money that he took, made sure that the state got paid, and so that it got them the unemployment insurance that they wound up having to need when he wound up going to jail and his business folded. So, it wasn't the sexiest of cases, but it was something that needed to be done.

The one case that I was able to work on--I didn't try it, but I was able to get people convicted by way of pleas--was back in 2003, when, as a member of the Attorney General's Office Gangs Bureau, we prosecuted the Latin Kings here in New Jersey. We focused our prosecution on their state "Crown Council." So, we had five different cases going at five different places throughout the state, Paterson, Newark, Camden, Freehold and, I believe, Elizabeth, Union County, Elizabeth. We wound up investigating with the state police and arresting their entire leadership structure--they had like maybe eight people or nine people on the "Crown Council"--as well as in each one of those cities, which was the major cities, the entire crown structure--that's what they call their president on down, the "crown structure" of those cities--and prosecuting them for a variety of crimes. While it was heartbreaking to do that, because they're prosecuting people who look like me, who were me at that age, and I'm saying, "But for the grace of God, there go I," where they were different was that they were abusing our own community. They were stealing from our community, dealing drugs in our own community, roping kids from our community, Spanish kids, into their group, intimidating the neighborhoods. So, that's how I was able to justify prosecuting them. We wound up incarcerating all of them, and that kind of led to the dismantling of the Latin Kings, at least for the next four or five years, here in the State of New Jersey because their leadership was in jail. There wasn't really anybody to fill the void. They were afraid to regroup because if we got them once, we'd get them again. So, we knocked them out for a couple of years thereafter, and for that time period, people in Paterson, Newark, Lakewood, Camden, at least in those neighborhoods, they could feel a little bit more comfortable knowing that we cleaned it up a little, to the extent that we could.

AC: Did you retain a lot of Latinx clients when you were a lawyer?

PJ: No, no, I never worked in private practice.

AC: You never did private practice.

PJ: Never did. So, I didn't have any clients. As far as families whose cases I prosecuted on behalf of, well, I've remembered a number of them, including this one kid who got beat up in Jersey City, where I prosecuted the people who beat him up. His family, we kept in touch for years, but after a while, we lost touch because, thankfully, I'm sure he moved on, went to college, and started a family and successful career or whatever. So, that was good.

AC: How did you decide to become a judge?

PJ: I just applied for it. I was looking to do something different, and out of all the jobs that I applied for, this is the only one that came through. I kind of applied for it as a goof, to be quite honest, because who thinks that you can apply for a judgeship and get it, nobody in my family, right? There's still so few Latino judges. So, I gave it a shot. Because of my father's political activity all those years, the politicians remembered him, because they saw my name and they remembered him because I'm Pedro Jimenez, Jr., and my father is Pedro Jimenez, so they're like, "Oh, Pete's son." Because of that, my father was able to open a door for me to get a good look by these folks, and then, one thing led to another, and I got the nomination 36-0. That's what I say. That's how many senators voted for me, all thirty-six of them.

AC: Were there other Latino judges?

PJ: At the time, yes. At the time, yes. When I got on the bench, I think I did the numbers, and I have a PowerPoint presentation, where I've documented every Latino who had ever become a state Superior Court judge in New Jersey. From John Dios, who was a Cuban gentleman in Newark back in the mid-'70s, to the latest one, which I believe is Lourdes Lucas out of Monmouth County, who is the first Latino, period, in Monmouth County. We still have some counties in the state that have never had a Latino judge. It's fifty-two total, because some have passed on or whatever. At the time that I became a judge, I may have been only the twenty-fourth Latino ever to become a judge. I became a judge in 2008. You figure from 1976 to 2008, there was only twenty-four that ever became a judge. Under the present structure, our judicial system was created first in the late 1940s, because they had a different system before that. Then, the state constitution was passed, and then the structure for our court system was developed back then. This is out of 420 judges. That's how few our numbers were when I became judge. [Except] for John Dios, who passed on, every single Latino who was made a judge was still working as a judge, active. When you retire, you can get called back to serve as a judge on recall, and you work part time. When I became a judge, every one of them was still working, except for John Dios because he passed away.

AC: What difficulties did you face, along with other judges, as a Latino?

PJ: People disregard you. They think you don't belong here. You don't use the big "ye" and "thou" and "thou shall not" kind of language that they're used to the white judges using. Your approach is different. Your approach is more humanistic, more empathetic. You can relate to not only victims but defendants more, because you were them or could have been them. So, your approach to problem-solving and handing the cases is a little different. Your approach to how the attorneys conduct themselves in court is also a little different as well. You, as a Latino, know when you're dealing with somebody who's not Latino, and they've got a little bit of funky self about them because you're Latino. You feel it, you know it. I've felt that a lot, and you take one of two approaches. Either you confront them about it in a very assertive, confrontational kind of way, or you kind of massage them through it, so they get the picture in a very nice way, "I know how you're feeling, bro, but let's walk past this together, so I can get you on my team." I usually do it that way, the sly kind of approach to things.

AC: What significant case have you ruled on as a judge …

PJ: Well, I've been in a number of them.

AC: … Involving the Latinx population?

PJ: I ruled on a case recently that says that if they're released on pretrial release--defendants--that if they get arrested for committing a crime, the state can't charge them with a crime and for contempt for violating a court order, basically double counting. They're released on a court order that says you have to do all these things while you're on release and also can't commit any crimes. So, you can't prosecute them for double the crime. For the most part, the vast majority

of people in the criminal justice system, both incarcerated and out, under supervision, in this state, are Latino. It affects our community the most. That's the one that I think gives people a chance. Look, if they commit a crime, they're innocent until proven guilty, but you only get one shot and one crime to convict them on. You can't throw everything at them including the kitchen sink. You've got to be fair about it and how you implement the laws of the state to hold people accountable for their conduct. For years, Latinos always seemed to be subjected to extra--now with immigration. So, you've got to make sure you do rulings and implement the law in the way where it's fair to everyone. I think that decision goes a long [way]. I've been told by my colleagues that that decision has gone a long way to stopping the state from doing that. They don't do that anymore, based on my decision. Now, it's going to be decided by the Supreme Court soon, but for now, because of my ruling, they don't file those charges anymore. We'll see what happens. Either the Supreme Court says, "Jimenez was right," or "Jimenez was wrong." [Editor's Note: On July 20, 2020, in *State v. Antoine McCray* and *State v. Sahaile Gabourel*, the New Jersey Supreme Court found that the state cannot prosecute contempt charges for violations of conditions of pretrial release under the Criminal Justice Reform Act.]

AC: What changes have you seen in the legal system?

PJ: A lot more oppressive approaches to handling cases by prosecutors' offices. A lot less caring about the people who are being arrested, who are being prosecuted, who are being processed through the system, where they don't treat them as people but instead as things, because they're charged with a crime. So, they're a scumbag, dirtbag, all these negative connotations they attached to them, instead of saying and holding firm to the idea, "These are people who committed a mistake." Yes, some mistakes are worse than others and you've got to hold them accountable to it, but you've got to process them the same way that you would anyone else. You can't think any less of them; everybody's entitled to the same due process. So, there's no cutting corners, and as law enforcement, you've got to check your bias at the door. The increase in bias in law enforcement is what's a little unnerving to me and a huge, huge issue.

AC: This can be a little bit sensitive; you don't have to answer if you don't want to. Has your Latinx identity ever influenced your ruling or judgement or perspective on cases involving Latino plaintiffs or defendants?

PJ: Now let me ask you this. This term Latinx, I guess this is to avoid having to say Latino versus Latina.

AC: Yes.

PJ: Okay. See, when I grew up, if you were Latino, it wasn't really a masculine thing. Male or female, you were Latino, just like when they created the word Hispanic. I get it, I get it, I understand.

No, it hasn't, not in the way I've ruled. No, because I have to be unbiased in my approach to decision making, but it has to and it does. When I sentence somebody to something other than jail, when I put them on probation, where they have to do things, I'm exposing them to an entire

system of justice that has a bunch of resources that they can have at their disposal--because I said so--to help them do better and rehabilitate themselves.

My experience living in communities with Latinos and with Blacks, in the communities that they're from, I lived in those communities. They were them; I was them. I understand where they're coming from, so I can have a better idea as to what it's going to take for them to get through it, just like I'm the father of a developmentally disabled child. When I deal with someone who has some kind of disability, or a parent, for example, who has a child with a disability and they have an issue, I know what I can do to help them. I have a source of knowledge and a frame of reference that a lot of people don't have. I can tap into that and say, "Somebody else is going to tell you to do A, B, and C. I'm going to tell you to do H, I, and J, because this is why it's going to help. This is the effectiveness of it." I can access it better, based on my experience, and you have to, because you have to do individualized sentencing for people with regards to that. Everybody gets the numbers as far as jail time or probation time. That's unchangeable. You have some flexibility with that, with regards to what you want them to do on probation to help get them better, or when you are trying to analyze a case to make sense of it to see what, really, this case is about. When you discuss it with the attorneys, that helps them understand what this case is about.

I had a case recently, quickly, where a mother got fed up with her son--who is twenty-one years old--because he didn't want to go to work. So, she hit him in the head with a board or something--I guess one of those cutting boards, whatever--or hit him in the back. Well, they charged the mother with assault, but the son had autism. He was autistic, and the mother was the primary caregiver of the kid because the father had abandoned them. This kid was documented autistic, getting services from the Division of Developmental Disability. He was classified in the school, he had an IEP [Individualized Education Program], all the stuff that documents that he has a developmental disability, which is autism. Yes, the mother gets mad and frustrated that he doesn't get up and go to school, because that's part of his programming. She didn't do that because she was violent. She did it because she's finally gotten worn down with having to be solely responsible for this son, who is a struggle to deal with every day that he's been alive, and she is the only one who's had to deal with him. Yes, at some point after twenty-one years, there may come a time when she might lose it. She didn't kill the guy, but she hit him. She shouldn't have done that, but she did. You understand, being the father of a developmentally disabled kid, what parents go through. Autism is very different than being the [parent] of a kid with down syndrome, which is what I have. I've seen autism, and it's a very difficult disability to deal with and control, because the kids either are quiet and are nonresponsive or they're constantly acting out. It's like controlling a kid who never stops moving or never shuts up. That experience allows me to sympathize with both, and so that I can figure out, with my sympathy, what I need to do in that particular case. That's why you have to do it as a judge, a case-by-case approach.

Now, I don't cut anybody any breaks because they're a minority. I don't impose anything harsh on somebody who's not a minority. It allows me to help fashion the approach that I take towards the rehabilitative aspects of sentencing that I get to impose to try and put these people on the best track to succeed, because that's the important thing. When you sentence somebody, unless you're sentencing them to jail, you get a chance to put them in the best position to succeed, with regards to rehabilitative services. That's why you have to give it some thought.

AC: Can you talk about your experience as the president of the Hispanic Bar Association? [Editor's Note: Pedro Jimenez served as the president of the Hispanic Bar Association of New Jersey from 2002 to 2003.]

PJ: That was fun, but that was a lot of work. I got to meet a lot of people. Again, during my presidency, I had this entire agenda lined up. It totally fell to the wayside because the issue that we were dealing [with] then was, we had the first Latina named attorney general of the State of New Jersey, Zulima Farber. All proud, they couldn't believe it. Me as a prosecutor, I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, I never thought I would see the day," especially since she's a dark-skinned Cuban lady. I'm saying to myself, "Oh, my gosh, these white people are freaking out. They don't even get it. They're so progressive." Usually, when you get Latinos appointed to positions like there, they're kind of light skinned; they kind of fit in. Zulima didn't fit in, not by appearances. She fit in in the sense that she was incredibly intelligent, had a great deal of a legal experience, a fantastic track record of accomplishment, was skilled, legally skilled, personally skilled, great for the position. They wound up having an issue with regards to an incident that she got involved in, where it then became, "Well, now we're going to move to get her out of there." As [for] the organization, I had to rally the organization and rally the political forces to try and keep her from losing her job, failed to do that. Then, the conversation went from trying to keep her from being terminated to, "What are our options now? How are you going to represent us in government?" So, that was the most difficult time, but I got a chance to meet a lot of people and make connections and do some good work and get balls rolling in a number of different directions, so that when I left, everyone else picked them up and kept them rolling for progress.

AC: What did serving on the New Jersey Supreme Court Advisory Committee on Minority Concerns consist of? How was that experience?

PJ: That was influencing the court and the judicial system with regards to policies that they needed to implement that would better serve the Latino community, like access to the court, fairness and justice, increased number of interpreters, materials in Spanish language, language lines, so that when somebody called, they could have interpreter services, ombudsmen at the courthouses who could help people, in all different languages, have access to the court if they wanted to file a complaint, whether it be domestic violence or just a regular complaint, or referral services with the Bar Association, so that there's more attorneys available to handle Spanish-speaking or non-English speaking individuals, that kind of stuff. A wide variety of [issues], more judges on the bench who are Latino, more Latino employees to diversify the workforce, that kind of stuff. [Editor's Note: An ombudsman is an official who is appointed to receive and investigate complaints made by individuals of abuses or maladministration by public officials.]

AC: As a judge, what counties have you worked in?

PJ: As a judge, Mercer County and Middlesex County.

AC: Which one has been your most favorable county to work in?

PJ: I love them both. I love them both. Middlesex is my home county. A lot of the people who I grew up with and are close friends I work with now, but Mercer County is where I learned how to become a judge. I made some fantastic friends there who I love to this day dearly. They're family members of mine, so either one. Mercer County's farther from my home, so a little bit more inconvenient to get to, but I don't choose one or the other. I have to choose Middlesex because it's like fifteen minutes away from my house. When my daughter calls, I can just go home right away to see her as opposed to traveling an hour. Let me tell you, they're both fantastic places to work. Like any place, they have both good and bad people, but both places have a vast majority of good people who make it a great place to be.

AC: What is next for you in your career?

PJ: Retirement, in nine years, hopefully, where I want to do something where I want nothing to do with the law, because I'm tired of it. I want to be able to focus in on dealing with my daughter and getting her started, because by the time I retire, she'll have graduated school and began a career, and just live life afterwards. Ideally, if I can go back to teaching like I used to, that would be great, part-time gigs here at Rutgers to help deal with students, shape their minds and stuff, not so much at the law school but in the Criminal Justice Program here. They have great students here. This is a great program, and you get to shape a lot of good minds in the right direction. You have a lot of experiences that you can share with people, so that they can really feel what is it that you're doing and decide for themselves what they want to do. I mean, I can't tell you how many of my former college students I had who became lawyers and sheriff's officers and police officers and attorneys who to this day I still see them, and they're like, "Yes, you know, I went through it because of you, because of what you said." So, that's a good feeling, when people credit you with having a positive influence in their life.

AC: What school were you a professor in?

PJ: I taught here, at the Criminal Justice Program at Rutgers. I was an adjunct professor at Seton Hall Law School and taught there. Then there was Fairleigh Dickinson University--I taught in the paralegal studies program--as well as Union County College, and I may be missing one.

AC: Did you see a large amount of Latino and Latina students in your classes?

PJ: Growing, growing numbers at the college levels, at Rutgers here. At law school, a little bit, not so much. In the paralegal studies program, I saw more, but they were older students. These were students going into a second career, so you'd see some Latino--no Latino males, just one or two Latinas.

AC: That is it on my behalf. If you have anything else you want to say, please go ahead.

PJ: Okay. I think I've given you more, but I appreciate you letting me be part of this. I wanted to give you as much as I can. I think what you're doing, from what Professor Fernandez, Lilia, explained to me, it seemed like this is a fascinating endeavor you're engaged in. If you can just keep in touch with me and give me an idea as to how it all turns out, I'd appreciate it. [Editor's

Note: Lilia Fernandez, Henry Rutgers Term Chair and Associate Professor of Latino and Caribbean Studies and History at Rutgers, directs the Latino/a New Jersey History Project.]

AC: Of course. Thank you.

PJ: If you want to talk about getting another perspective, I want you to try to reach out to this individual, Mr. Tejada.

AC: I am going to stop this now.

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

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