RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT MERCADO

FOR THE

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and
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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Aryana Mercado: Today is November 19, 2021. My name is Aryana Mercado, and I am interviewing my uncle, Robert Mercado, for the Latino New Jersey History Project at his office in Newark, New Jersey. Thank you, *Tio* [Uncle], for agreeing to sit down with me for this interview. We are going to start off with a simple question. Where were you born and raised?

Robert Mercado: I was born and raised in the City of Newark, in the North Ward section of Newark. We grew up, initially, in the Columbus Homes, public housing. That's where my parents migrated to from Puerto Rico, and we lived there for the first five years. Then, my dad eventually bought a house on Summer Avenue, in the North Ward, and my brothers and sister, we all lived in that family house on Summer Avenue.

AM: All right. I know you spoke about your siblings, but how many siblings do you have?

RM: I have eight siblings. I have seven brothers and one sister. There are nine of us.

AM: What was it like growing up with eight siblings and most of them being boys?

RM: Well, I always had companionship through my brothers. We lived in an apartment, and it was very tight. There was six of us in one room, and my sister had her own room. Then, my other brother had their own room. We were a very close-knit family. I was able to learn from my older brothers and then teach my younger brothers. We have always been able to keep each other company. Growing up in North Newark, in the neighborhood that we lived in, it was a really nice neighborhood. There was kids around the neighborhood. It wasn't as dangerous as it is today. We went to school. My older brothers went to their respective schools, and my sister went to Catholic school. We went to public school.

AM: You mentioned briefly how Newark has changed, but what was it like when you were growing up? Were there many Latinos? What was the population, if you can remember?

RM: When we moved to Summer Avenue, we were one of two Hispanic families. It was a predominantly white area, at the time, and we were the second Hispanic family on the block. Then, as the years passed, [there were] more Latinos and, in particular, more Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans were the most Hispanics that lived in the North Ward. Then, it was Cubans, and then slowly, you have Dominicans, and then, over the years, you had a more diverse Central and Southern American population.

AM: How have you seen that Newark has changed today, based on your description of it from the past?

RM: Growing up in the '70s--that's when I went to elementary school--growing up in the '70s and the '80s, our neighborhood was a diverse neighborhood. Crime wasn't as apparent the way it is today. We went to school. After school, there were after-school programs. We played in the local parks. We went to church on Sundays. We really just stayed around the neighborhood. We played in our yard, we played down the street, and the kids in the neighborhood got along with each other and we knew each other. The parents of the kids kind of kept an eye on us, and we looked out for each other. We all knew each other. The community was a lot closer back then, very different than now. Now, the neighborhood has changed, and there are less homeowners living in a house. Now, it's more rental. Folks rent

apartments there, and many of the folks kind of tend to themselves and are not real engaged with each other as a community the way it used to be.

AM: Okay. You said it was a predominantly white neighborhood growing up. Did that, at all, affect how you were growing up, or was it quickly changed to Puerto Ricans?

RM: In the beginning, when we moved there--over the first like five, ten years--there were very few Latinos, and we were subject to--I won't say racist behavior--but we weren't always welcomed in certain neighborhoods. We worked in Carvel Ice Cream, for example. My brothers and I all worked at this particular ice cream spot in the town next to us, which is Belleville, which is right next to North Newark. That was a predominately white neighborhood as well, and we were always subject to verbal and adverse behaviors by the community, by the police. They were not welcoming to Hispanics at that time. Over the years, the neighborhood began to change, and then, we began to see more Hispanics, more African Americans, and slowly, the white population began to leave, and then, we began to see an influx of Latino population.

AM: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with your parents growing up and what they did when you and your siblings were growing up?

RM: My mom was a housewife. She was the nurturer. She spent a hundred percent of her time raising us in the home. My dad was the primary breadwinner. He was a barber by trade. He owned his own barbershop. In fact, he was one of the first Puerto Rican barbers in the North Ward. I would predict that he probably was the first, but I don't know that for a fact. He was the first in our area, he owned his own barbershop. Soon after he retired as a barber, he worked for the Newark Public Schools as a security guard. He also worked as a part-time bartender. My dad worked two and three jobs for most of my life that I knew him. He was always working. He had very little time to spend in the home with us. He had little time to go to parent conferences, or to Little League games, or to anything we did growing up. My dad was absent in those things not because he didn't want to be there, probably, because he was working somewhere. My mom was the one who attended to us. She fed us, she clothed us, she made sure that we went to school, made sure that we went to church. She was the nurturer in the family. The balance between the two is how we were raised and how we were nurtured. It was very different than many other families, I would think. We're a very large family and close-knit family and kept to one another and supported each other.

AM: It is beautiful. Now, we are going to transition a little bit into your education. I know you briefly talked about it already, but for your grammar school and your high school, where did you go, and were there any influential people that you may remember?

RM: My brothers and I, most of us went to public school. I went to Elliott Street Elementary School, and then, we had a junior high school that was called Broadway Junior High--which is now called Luis Muñoz Marin Middle School--and then high school. I think the uniqueness of my story, of my experience, is that I graduated high school when I was sixteen years old. I only went to high school for two years, and I graduated. I went to Rutgers in New Brunswick, to Rutgers College, and I was the youngest college student on campus. I was sixteen when I was accepted and entered the EOF program, the Educational Opportunity Fund program. I had the benefit of my older brothers. I would not have applied to school or have been on the track that I had if it weren't for my brothers, my older brother, in

particular, Freddy. Freddy was the first to go to college at Rutgers. Freddy was the one who guided me and assisted me in the application process and ensured that I registered and applied, and I did so and I got accepted. He was already at Rutgers, so I kind of just followed behind him. So, I had the benefit of his mentorship and his guidance because I was very young; I was just a little kid when I went to Rutgers.

Soon after, I went to Rutgers. I pledged a fraternity. I think that's probably what changed my life and my experience at Rutgers. I pledged Lambda Theta Phi, Latin Fraternity, Inc. Again, I had the benefit of my brother Freddy, who was already a brother in the fraternity, and I kind of followed his suit. Then, from there, once I joined a fraternity, it kind of gave me cultural awareness. I didn't really know who I was and what my culture stood for until I went to Rutgers and until I became affiliated with the fraternity. That really gave me [an] awareness of the Latino community and how I, as a Latino, stood in the eyes of others that were non-Hispanic. Growing up in Newark, I was around Blacks and Hispanics. When I got to Rutgers, Latinos weren't always looked upon favorably. We were always discriminated against in one way or another. We were treated differently by many folks. Our experience wasn't always as pleasant as it is for some folks that are non-Hispanic. At least my experience, I experienced different kinds of discrimination in different areas.

The fraternity and my friends on campus, we lived in a special section of Rutgers called Latin Images, and it was on the third floor of this dorm, Frelinghuysen dorm, and they had all the Hispanics on the same floor. It was kind of interesting because for some they said that they were keeping the Hispanic tradition, and it was for the cultural awareness. I kind of thought that the University just wanted to keep all eyes on Hispanics and put them all in the same spot. [laughter] They had the same thing for the African Americans; they were the Paul Robeson dorms. This was on Rutgers College campus. Rutgers College campus was predominantly white. It wasn't like Livingston or the other campuses, where there was a more diverse community. Rutgers was predominantly white, and there were very few Latinos. My experience at Latin Images was what helped shape me, along with the relationships that we built on that floor with the other students.

We all had a goal to want to graduate. I remember the first circle when I got to Rutgers. They put us in a circle, we held hands, and our counselor says to me, "Look to the left and look to the right because in four years, they're not going to be there." It was like, "One in four of you are going to make it." We were like, "No, we're all going to make it." So, we all stuck together and helped each other, and we weren't alone in school. That's one thing I can tell you. My experience in college is that I never felt alone. I always had someone, whether it was my brother, or my fraternity brother, or whether my classmates, or whether my friends in Latin Images. We all had a vested interest to help each other succeed, and we did a lot of studying in groups. Some of us needed more guidance than others, and being the age that I was, I needed a lot of guidance. I didn't do very well my first couple of years. I really struggled at Rutgers and eventually graduated some years later.

AM: I mean, it is interesting you bring up Latin Images because Latin Images still exists at Rutgers. I actually lived there my freshman and sophomore year. So, it is amazing to hear about the legacy that is, since it is still part of the family these years later. So, I know you kind of talked about what Rutgers was like back then, with Livingston being where most of the minorities were, and Rutgers College being where more of the white students …

RM: Elite.

AM: Yes. I know you talked a little bit about discrimination, but if you feel comfortable, can you talk about if there was any one specific moment that you were made to feel like you did not belong at Rutgers College or just at college in general, if you have one moment?

RM: Like I said, my first couple years are Rutgers, I really struggled academically. My high school prepared me in certain areas and then didn't prepare me in other areas, and writing was probably one of my greatest deficits. I did not know how to write, period. So, I went to writing lab for four years, every semester for four years--and even probably beyond that--because I was really determined to learn how to write. By the grace of God, through the help of a lot of people, I was able to learn how to write. When I graduated Rutgers, I was able to write to the extent that my thesis was fifty pages of my writing, and I went from not knowing to being able to.

I had the benefit, again, of folks in the EOF program that provided some tutoring. I owe my entire collegiate career to one of the deans at Rutgers, Dean Plummer, Dean James Plummer. I struggled at Rutgers. When I say I struggled, I was put on probation, I was told I could not return, and I begged and pleaded, and Dean Plummer always gave me a second chance. He believed in me, and I was able to complete my studies there. It was because of the support of people like Dean Plummer and Dean [Eve] Sachs. We had our counselors; my counselor was Larry Miller, who became a close friend afterwards. Hector Bonilla, he came after, later on. He joined the EOF program. He was one of the Latino leaders at Rutgers, and he really worked with us and volunteered. If one person stands out at Rutgers, he is one of them. Later on, one of my classmates, who later on graduated and would become assistant dean, George Santiago, Jr., he is a friend and later became a mentor and a leader at Rutgers in the Hispanic community.

I would say one of the experiences that really stands out when I say discrimination--I'll give you an example. When I was pledging, and back then, when we pledged, white fraternities have a pledge book, and that's their Bible. Black fraternities walk in a line and walk in unison and wear the same clothes. Lambda Theta Phi incorporated a little bit of both ideologies. We walked in a line, and we also carried pledge books. So, there was this one incident, we used to eat together--we ate, slept, studied together--and one incident, we were walking to the cafeteria, to the Commons. My line brothers and I were walking, and as we were coming down the ramp, everyone was eating lunch, and there was a big group of white male students. They all decided to throw oranges and hit us, and they just bombarded us with oranges. That's the kind of discrimination that we faced as Latinos. They wouldn't do that to any white fraternity, but they did it to us and they did it to us because of who we were. We were different. They didn't like what they saw, but that didn't stop us. We still continued to walk on line proud. We still continued to do what we did on campus and make a difference in promoting Latino culture and Latino awareness.

AM: I have heard many stories like that, so it is really interesting. Still talking a little bit about college, what did you study in your undergrad years?

RM: When I went to college, I had this idea that I was going to be a businessman. I was going to work in New York in the stock market, and I was going to make all this money. So, I went in as an economics major and, after the first semester in the first year, knew that that was not the track that I was able to do. I failed economics, so I changed. I took different types of courses, and my studies led me to the social

sciences. That's what my strength was. So, I studied sociology and Puerto Rican and Caribbean Studies. I think most of the Latinos on campus either got a double major in Puerto Rican and Caribbean Studies, or that was their major because the courses there, they said, "Take those courses because that's going to help you."

The courses offered by the Department of Puerto Rican/Latino Studies back then did more than just offer courses about Latinos. They were really, really a department that cared about its students. It guided and mentored the students, from the department head all the way down to the secretary to the professors. It provided an experience that is unparalleled to any other that I've experienced. Through the courses that I took through the department, I was able to learn not only about myself but about my culture, the Puerto Rican culture, the Latino culture, but also other cultures. It really opened our eyes to how society viewed us. It opened my eyes to religion. I never took a course on religion. We [had] several courses on religion and some professors that were phenomenal, that really challenged you to think differently and challenged you to see things in a totally different way. It gave me the ability to think critically and to really look at the world through the eyes of a Latino, which I really never had that view until I got to Rutgers and until I started taking these types of courses. I started taking social work classes. The sociology came first and then social work. I got into the social work, and I realized that that was my forte. Social work came natural to me. Once I had enough credits to graduate with a major in Puerto Rican and Caribbean Studies and sociology, then later on I continued my graduate courses, as I embarked on my professional career.

AM: Do you have a favorite memory from college, if you can pick one?

RM: We used to have Rutgers *Unión Estudiantil Puertorriqueña*, the UEP. [At] Rutgers UEP, we used to have these celebrations that invited family to come and be a part of the experience on campus. It was a dinner, and I really, really looked forward to those activities. The fraternity had an annual dinner that we invited folks from the campus and family to celebrate the fraternity and acknowledge individuals who stood out, who volunteered their time and services to help others. Our fraternity is a community service-oriented fraternity, so we did a lot of community work. So, the activities that stand out for me is all of these types of community service activities that we used to do not only within the fraternity but Latin Images and Rutgers UEP and also the other Latin organizations. We had what was called RUC, Rutgers University--I forget the other acronym names, but it was an umbrella organization that comprised a representative from all the Latino organizations. So, we kind of worked together as a Latino cohort to ensure that, one, we support each other's activities, and two is that we didn't conflict with each other. So, it was very important that we supported each other, whether you were on Douglass Campus, or Rutgers, Busch Campus, or Livingston, or Cook Campus. Regardless of what campus you were, you had an organization that was working and servicing the students. We often worked together and ran into each other in the different circles of meetings that we all participated in within the university.

AM: Excellent. Now, we have the Latino Student Council, which is kind of like that, the overseeing council of other Latino organizations at Rutgers. It is kind of similar. Can you talk a little bit about your roles in Lambda Theta Phi while you were in college or even now?

RM: When I pledged the fraternity, I really didn't even know what I was getting myself into. Lord knows, I didn't know. The pledging process really resulted in me developing a bond with strangers that

I did not know until I got to Rutgers, who became a really close-knit family. One of the things that we wanted to do is service. How do we help our Latino community? Our goal was to promote Latino culture on campus, to promote volunteerism within the University, and then also to engage with Latinos in the community, in the New Brunswick community in particular, because Rutgers is right in the heart of downtown New Brunswick. So, we were able to really collaborate with other organizations, fraternal organizations. We were the first Latino fraternity on campus, I think, and we argued that we were the first Latino fraternity in the state and possibly in the nation. On campus, we were definitely focused on establishing ourselves as an organization that promoted education and academics, that promoted culture, and that promoted service. Those three are probably the priority areas for us.

We wanted to engage in politics on campus. We wanted to engage in the University, particularly because the University, at that time, did not support minority organizations. Very little funding--I would say less than one percent of funding--went to minorities. Most of all the funding, activity funding, fraternity fundings, most governmental fundings from the University, were dedicated to more white organizations. African Americans, who were established before us, were getting some but totally not what they deserved, and we were getting practically nothing. We wanted a seat at the table, and we were able to do so. We were able to join the fraternal council on campus. We were able to establish our chapter at the University in '78, and I was in school in 1980, so it was two years. We were just getting ourselves organized on campus, and we had a lot of brothers that were brilliant in terms of planning, in terms of cultural awareness and community engagement. Collectively, we worked to really participate in the University on issues that were important to Latinos and bringing issues that were not being addressed, like funding for Latino and minority organizations.

AM: Did you hold any positions in the fraternity?

RM: Yes. Throughout my years, I held various positions. I was president of the chapter. I was vice president of the national board. I was president of the national board. So, I reached the pinnacle of the positions within the fraternity. I worked my way through. I was always surrounding myself with those that knew more than me, and I really took in a lot and learned from them. Some of our brothers started to graduate, so we needed to kind of recruit. I went to Rutgers for more than four years. I went to Rutgers for about five or six years, I believe, over time, because I left school, I came back, and then I left, and I came back and eventually graduated. In fact, I graduated with my younger brother, Jose, in 1983--I mean, 1993. So, a long twelve years for me to get my bachelor's degree, but I continued, I didn't quit, and I refused to not be able to accomplish what I set out to do. It took time, but I was able to do so. So, the fraternity, yes, I was national board president at one time. I was chapter president as well. I held leadership positions within the organization throughout my time.

AM: Awesome. We are going to move on to graduate school. I know you briefly spoke about it, but can you talk a little more about your graduate program? What did you do? Why did you choose it?

RM: So, I went to my graduate school--let me preface that by saying that once I graduated, once I left college, I started working in the nonprofit community. I worked for nonprofit organizations throughout my entire career, up from 1982 until I started working for the Department of Law and Public Safety. The Juvenile Justice Commission is where I work now. It is through JJC that I was afforded an opportunity to go to graduate school. It was an executive MPA [Master of Public Administration] program at Rutgers in Newark. So, I graduated in 2005. It was a specialized program for professionals

in the field that were already working, and it was like a cohort model. There were twenty-five of us, and we studied as a group for two years. We started in 2003, and we all graduated in 2005. It was probably to say that [of] all twenty-five that started, twenty-five graduated. JJC gave me that opportunity. Initially, they were paying my tuition, and then they stopped, and then, you know, we went into the student loan business. So, I got my MPA in 2005. I've always worked with kids, in particular, and family. I later went back to school and went to Rutgers School of Social Work. I said before social work really, really came easy to me. I went back, and I got my Master's in Social Work. I graduated in 1993, and I'm a certified social worker. I had a private practice at one time. I no longer have that for personal reasons, but I have two masters that I was able to attain throughout my career. I continued school. I'm always looking to learn. I love school.

AM: That is great. Can you tell me a little more about your current profession, like exactly what you do?

RM: So, I'm a social worker. I'm a social work and juvenile justice practitioner, is what we call ourselves. As a social worker, long before I got my degree in social work, I had been doing social work since I was a teenager working at my first job at La Casa de Don Pedro in Newark, when I was a sophomore in college. I've always worked in the nonprofit sector serving kids. I later on moved to help counseling kids to counseling kids and counseling families. In 1997, I got a job working for the Juvenile Justice Commission in the Office of Juvenile Parole and Transitional Services. The commission is the state agency responsible for the rehabilitation of juveniles that are committed under its care. The Juvenile Parole Office is the office that provides parole supervision once youth are released on parole from the secure care and community programs. So, I've been in this position for twenty-four years and six months. As the regional supervisor, I am responsible for the seven northern counties in New Jersey. My main office is in Newark, but I have an office in New Brunswick, Jersey City and Paterson. I supervise parole officers, who are state-sworn law enforcement officers, as well as civilian staff, that includes social workers, substance abuse counselors, community program specialists, and clerical staff. I'm responsible for the day-to-day operation. I'm a member of the management team. A couple years ago, I was acting director for parole for three years, and I continue to hold the title of Regional Supervisor in the north. [Editor's Note: Founded in 1972, La Casa de Don Pedro, named for Puerto Rican activist Pedro Albizu Campos, provides community services in Newark.]

AM: What drew you to working with kids?

RM: This particular population is kids who have made mistakes, kids who have been found, by a court of law, to be [an] adjudicated delinquent. In our business in juvenile, we don't call them inmates. We don't call them convicts. We call them residents. The juveniles don't get convicted of crimes; they get adjudicated of crimes. We are in the opinion that every kid has the opportunity to rehabilitate. Our role is to facilitate that rehabilitation. We do so by working with kids in our secure-care facility; it's like prison, in certain cases. Our most secure facility is like prison. It's iron gates; it's the whole bit. We have a training school. It's probably the oldest training school in the country, and it's called the New Jersey Training School for Boys. That's where most of our kids go. Then, we have community programs that are in the community. We call them community residential homes. In our community residential homes, we have social workers, counselors and staff that help youngsters. They go to school there, they eat, they provide recreation, but more importantly, we provide them treatment, treatment for

mental health, treatment for substance abuse and/or any other type of treatment that may be necessary. The youth that come to us will eventually go home in a relatively short period of time.

There are some youth that get long sentences, ten, fifteen years, for crimes of murder and homicide and things of that nature. Most of our kids are nonviolent offenders, and we feel that secure-care settings, or detention-like settings, is not the appropriate settings to rehabilitate kids. We strongly believe that a community setting is where we ought to be rehabilitating kids, working with community agencies in the community, working with families, working with the kids, to help them develop the coping skills to be able to lead productive lives. When kids are deemed eligible for parole, they finish their sentences, and our staff here, our responsibility is to put together a community transition plan that incorporates education, treatment, counseling and other types of interest that the kids may have while they're in the community. We monitor and provide supervision over them and ensure that they're complying with the conditions of their release.

AM: What is your favorite part of the job, if you have one?

RM: I think my favorite part of the job is seeing kids succeed, kids who didn't believe in themselves, who come through our system. While many are in the opinion that we are about punishment, the fact [is] that we do the rehabilitative part in juvenile justice and to see young people really turn their lives around and start making good decisions as they start taking their academics more seriously. I think the proudest moment is when kids come back after they are done with us and know that they're now either working, or they're in college, or they're raising a family, they're crime free, they have really changed their lives. Knowing that you made an impact in the lives of others is probably the most rewarding in my business.

AM: Yes, that is nice. Moving forward, can you tell me a little bit about your role in politics or your time in politics?

RM: Okay, I've always loved politics. I got involved in politics through the fraternity. The fraternity, in order for us to be a part of the system, we had to be engaged in it. One of our chapters at Kean was supporting a candidate who now is our U.S. Senator Bob Menendez. My first campaign that I worked in was for Senator Menendez. At that time, he was running for school board in Union City, and the fraternity brothers all went to Union City and supported his candidacy, going door to door and trying to get people out to vote and support him. That was kind of the beginning of my political engagement, and I continued to do that throughout my college years. When I came home, in my professional career, I continued. I'm a member of the North Ward Democratic Committee for the last twenty years. I am a District Leader in District Eight of the North Ward, and just recently, in 2017, I was elected, it was for freeholder in District One. That name has changed to Commissioner. I was just reelected last year, in 2020, to another term as the Commissioner in District One for the Essex County Board of Commissioners. [Editor's Note: Robert Menendez has served as a U.S. Senator from New Jersey since 2006.]

AM: I know you talked a little bit about your involvement in Newark, in terms of politics, but can you go into detail about your involvement in Newark?

RM: Through my involvement with the North Ward Democratic Committee, everything we do is volunteer. No one gets paid, although they have elected paid positions, of which I am in one right now. Prior to that, for the last fifteen years, we engaged in the communities, really going door to door. I don't mean just during election time to ask people to vote but really advocating for families to better their situation. We had families needing housing, families that needed jobs, families that needed medical care, families that needed mental health. The more we engaged in the community, the more we realized how needy our community was. That kind of really is what spearheaded our work in the community, and working with the schools to help families that needed assistance, and getting kids enrolled in school, and families that needed assistance in getting kids enrolled in daycare, or preschool, getting families the appropriate medical care, getting families enrolled in medical insurance. Many families had language barriers; being advocates, being translators for families.

Working in the community, not only through politics, but also in my work in the nonprofit sector, I worked at La Casa de Don Pedro, a community-based organization. I worked with special needs kids for many years and really advocating for families with children with special needs. That's what led my career in social work, is working with families with children with mental health needs, and that's where my passion is. That's where I continue to work and to assist and advocate for families, to try to get them the appropriate necessary resources and care that they so desperately need.

AM: Awesome. How do you think growing up in Newark shaped who you are today?

RM: Growing up in Newark, it's interesting from a different perspective, because we were all considered poor. I never knew I was poor until I got to college, and they told me I was poor because I was in this EOF program. [laughter] I never considered myself poor. I always considered myself rich in terms of my family history and my family and the nurturing I got. I never spent a day hungry. I never didn't have clothes on my back. We always had food at the table, a roof over our heads. We were very fortunate to be able to live the life that we lived.

Living in the North Ward really gave me the opportunity to really see what diversity looked like. Most of my friends were Black and Hispanic. I didn't have too many white friends because our community was diverse. It wasn't until I got to Rutgers that I really kind of experienced being treated differently. I was non-white, and many folks--not all because I had a lot of friends that were white and were good friends and close friends--but there were a good portion, at that time, that were not welcoming to Hispanics. Newark gave me the opportunity to see the diversity in others, to see how people are different, and to see the different types of employment and schooling. I went to public school, so I got a well-rounded public school education. It allowed me to really experience different views and different viewpoints from people who are not like me.

AM: Are you a part of any other organizations or volunteer stuff in Newark?

RM: In my capacity as a Commissioner, I do participate in different activities that are sponsored by different community organizations. I support many different organizations, and--I forget, what was the question again?

AM: Are there any other community groups or community organizations that you are a part of?

RM: I was part of the North Ward Center. The North Ward Center is a community organization in the North Ward that has been a pillar in the community. It has a preschool. It has a social service agency. It has a charter school. It has a school dedicated to individuals with mental health. It has a senior citizen program that's dedicated to seniors. It's a community agency that has been around for a very long time. I've been a part of that organization for twenty years, initially, for the first fifteen years, as a volunteer. In the recreation component, I was a volunteer coach and a volunteer board member in the organization. Then, later on, I was hired as a part-time worker, and I did so until just this last year in 2020. The North Ward Center is the organization that I volunteered for.

AM: What has been the most meaningful part of your political engagement in Newark or New Jersey in general?

RM: I think the most meaningful is to see and get to collaborate and work with so many diverse organizations who are doing phenomenal work in the community. There are so many organizations that do good work, from organizations dedicated to seniors, to organizations dedicated to preschools, to recreation, to special needs. There's so many organizations [dedicated] to women issues, to domestic violence issues, to social justice issues. So, I think the most meaningful for me is to be able to collaborate and support these organizations at a county level. In our capacity, we're able, in many instances, to fund these organizations so that they can continue the work that they do. I think being able to work with organizations who provide important community work is probably the most rewarding.

AM: What contributions do you think you have made to Newark's Puerto Rican community, if you can think of any?

RM: In the capacity of Commissioner, I represent my constituents in District One, which is the North and East and Central Wards of Newark. I definitely feel that my work is supporting the organizations, and my work is supporting legislation that support organizations and support communities and to create avenues and opportunities for individuals in the community, so being a part of a team of commissioners that really work together with the county administration. In Essex County, we have a phenomenal leader, Joe DiVincenzo is the County Executive and his leadership team. Essex County is a county that has accomplished so much and is in the forefront of providing the necessary resources to the various municipalities in the county and organizations, and being able to really financially support organizations so that they can continue to provide resources and services to their constituents in the community.

AM: Okay. To kind of start wrapping things up, can you tell me a little bit about your family? I know we spoke about your siblings growing up, but if there is anything about your siblings now, about maybe your kids and how they make an impact on who you are and the work that you do in your community, you can talk about it.

RM: My family is unique in so many respects and not only by the setup of having eight boys and one girl, but each of my brothers bring unique aspects that I get to experience. Each has their own critical way of thinking, each has their own story, each has their own family, and each of my siblings and their families, my nieces and nephews, all bring a different experience, and I'm able to take it all in and be able to interact and get to see the different perspectives that my brothers and my sister have, and my nieces and nephews. I'm very proud of the accomplishments of all of my brothers and sister. I have a profession and I've been able to accomplish, but I am nowhere near as bright and as smart as my

siblings. I've always said that, "I have brothers that are brilliant. My sister is a phenomenal caregiver, educator." Each of my siblings have provided me the opportunity to learn. They mentor me. Even my younger brothers, I learned from them, as I learned from my older brothers, and we learned from each other. While we may have our differences, we've always maintained staying together as a family. I think our uniqueness is our close-knit ties to each other and to my parents. Again, this is all because of my parents, my mom and her nurturance and my dad for his unwavering work ethic. He taught us to work at everything that we have accomplished, and all of us, each of us, are successful in our own way, in our own careers, in our own family. I think, collectively, we all have been able to really provide each other with a support network that is second to none.

I spoke about my parents and siblings, but most important to me today is my immediate family. I am married to Jannet Medina and we have five children: four daughters, Jess (42), Melissa (36), Jessie (34), Stephanie (32), and our son, Bobby Jr. (29). Although we are a blended family, Jannet has two girls, Jess and Melissa, and I have two girls, Jessie and Stephanie, Jannet and I have Bobby Jr. together. We do not recognize the children as stepsisters and stepbrothers, but rather just brother and sisters.

Jannet and I are very proud of our children's accomplishments, both professionally and personally. Jessica, our oldest, is married to Brandt Elliot and they have one daughter, Sofia. They live in Grayson, Georgia. Jessica is a teacher and holds two master's degrees in education from University of Southern Carolina. Melissa is a single mother with one daughter, Hayleigh. She is a senior at Rutgers University and works as a Purchasing Agent for the County of Essex. Jessie is married to Jorge Maisonave and they have two daughters: Gabriella and Juliana. She has a bachelor's degree in security management from University of Phoenix. Stephanie is married to Brian Ng and they have three boys, Brian, Robert and Mason. Stephanie attends University of Phoenix and works as a Quality Control Supervisor for VitaQuest Pharmaceuticals. Bobby Jr. was recently married in 2022 to Jaida DeJesus. Bobby has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and works as a Sheriff Officer for the County of Essex. Jaida has bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in counseling.

AM: That is amazing. I second everything you say.

RM: How am I doing?

AM: [laughter] Awesome. That pretty much wraps up all the questions I have. Is there anything else you would like to add about anything?

RM: I can just say, for myself, as a person growing up in my family, in Newark, with my experiences in my career, I work to help others. I've lived a life of helping others, and I think there's no higher honor than to service other people. So, I work in a profession--it's not even work because this is what I love to do, and I love to help other people. If I had to think of something that I could probably improve upon, it's that I need to think more, "Help myself," because I'm always trying to help others. We all have our limitations and have our faults, and we try to learn from them and learn from each other, but more importantly, family is everything. Anyone that knows me knows that my family comes first. It comes before my job. It comes before my politics. It comes before anything and everything that I do. I encourage everyone always, your family is your blood, and it's important that you always maintain that close relationship with your family, even during tough times and even during times that there's adversarial relationships amongst us. That happens and it's natural, but our ability to always come back

and bring it to family is what keeps us close and I think it's what's kept us where we're at now. That, I believe, concludes my time.

AM: Yes, I think that concludes our interview. Thank you so much once again.

RM: Let me thank you for giving me this opportunity. I want to thank Rutgers and their Oral History Archives for the opportunity. Rutgers has a deep and personal part of me. I've been a part of Rutgers for most of my entire life. I serve in different capacities for the University as well, the Graduate School of Criminal Justice and now, most recently, the Juvenile Justice Certifications Program that we recently initiated with the JJC and Rutgers. I happen to be a part of that advisory group. I am humbled by the opportunity to share with you my story. Thank you.

AM: Thank you so much.

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

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