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AN INTERVIEW WITH RAFAEL PEREZ

FOR THE

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Jaida Diaz: I'm Jaida Diaz, and I'm conducting an interview on Wednesday, November 17, [2021] at 3:23 with Rafael Perez. Why don't we start with when and where you were born?

Rafael Perez: I was born in the city of Havana, Cuba, on September 19, 1968.

JD: What was it like growing up in Cuba?

RP: Well, growing up in Cuba, you can look at it in different ways. Now that I'm an adult and a middle-aged man and you look back to the time you were a kid, I could easily say that I had a great, great time when I was growing up. My childhood was very good. There's nothing interesting, like trips, vacations, places that you go, because in Cuba when I was growing up, and still, unfortunately, there's not much for the people to do. But if you are lucky enough to have a bunch of friends and live in a small town, you'll be running around with your friends all day, playing games like you don't see around here anymore, tag, tops, marbles, played basketball, played soccer, go to the beach--I grew up in a beach town--go fishing. All those activities that involved the outdoors, I did my whole life. Then, after you grow up and you come over here and you see the way that a lot of the kids grow, they, unfortunately, don't have a lot of outdoor exposure. Here, in the Northeast, we have wintertime. So, they're very restricted in the amount of activities they can do outdoors. I believe that growing up as a kid, I was blessed that I was able to run around like crazy and spend a lot of time, from morning to nighttime, with my friends and without any worries about a lot of traffic, because I grew up in a small town. Nobody's going to kidnap you, rob you, or kill you. I wouldn't have [any] of that. So, it was a fantastic experience.

JD: Nice. What were some of the most important experiences in your childhood?

RP: Important experiences?

JD: Anything notable? A fond memory you have from growing up?

RP: Well, I would have to say that it was waiting for summertime when the water got warm on the beach. Even though, for American standards, going to the beach in Cuba would be okay [all] year. But when you grow up in the Caribbean, the water gets better after May, June, July, so we can hit the beach all the time. During wintertime, nobody goes to the beach in Cuba. It's not like here, that you've got people going from the northern states going to Florida, even though the water temperature in Florida should be just about the same [as] Cuba. We'd never go to the beach unless summertime was getting close. We were always looking forward to that time of the year to start going to the beach.

JD: What was your occupation in Cuba?

RP: Well, in Cuba, I actually got to work for just two years. I graduated from medical school. I did social service for two years in a nursing home. The education in Cuba is free, but for you to contribute to the system as it is, before you decide to continue your career doing any other specialty within the medical field or whatever destination beyond that, you have to do two years

of social service work. So, that's what I did. I was a doctor in the nursing home for two years. That was my working years in Cuba.

JD: What made you choose that field?

RP: Well, when I was a child, my mom was a doctor in pharmacy. My aunt was a nutritionist in a hospital. So, I was exposed to the medical field at an early age, going to the hospital, seeing things, going to the pharmacy with my mom. So, I always found it very interesting, and that's what I chose.

JD: What prompted you to leave?

RP: Well, that's a good question. A lot of people decided to leave Cuba. There's been immigration out of Cuba happening for many, many years, mainly for political reasons, later on for economic reasons. Back in the '50s, when [Fidel] Castro took power, and he confiscated all private property and declared the country will be socialist, it was a big wave of immigration, mainly from professionals, doctors, lawyers, teachers, anybody that had a medical [degree], or engineers. A lot of them left Cuba, because they didn't agree with the system.

Later on, in my case--I came in 1994--it was a combination of me not liking the system and also the way that the situation was very bad in Cuba, from the socioeconomic standpoint, because, at that time, the Soviet Union, the great Iron Curtain came down during the [Ronald] Reagan presidency. All the bloc communist countries decided not to continue being communist. We then were left alone. We did a lot of advantageous trade with those countries, so everything was cut down. The situation in Cuba was very, very bad, on top of all the restrictions of your freedoms, stuff that you take for granted when you grow up in this country, stuff that you could never do in Cuba. So, I was frustrated, and I decided to leave.

JD: Where did you first stay when you came to the U.S.?

RP: When I came to the U.S., I stayed at my aunt's house here in New Jersey for about a year. In the meantime, I was going to school, learning English, and I was doing little part-time jobs in a hospital as a phlebotomist. I actually still live here in New Jersey after all these years.

JD: What challenges did you face immigrating to the U.S.?

RP: Well, immigrating to the U.S., by the time that I left Cuba, it was 1994. As a Cuban, we still had special status as a political refugee, so it was not a problem when we got here to America. The problem was to get to America, because we had to do it in an illegal way. You cannot actually get out of Cuba under any circumstances. You cannot be a tourist. Now, it might be a little different; they have changed a couple of things [in] the last twenty-something years since I left. But back in the 1990s, you couldn't leave Cuba; you couldn't have a passport. We actually illegally escaped on a boat. It took us three days to get to Florida, the Florida Keys. It was something that you look at it now, and it was a fun experience because we made it alive. But if you look at the reality of the people that take the same trip, many of them don't actually

make it alive. A lot of them die. So, I consider myself very lucky that I took that decision, and I made it to the United States alive.

JD: What made you stay in New Jersey?

RP: Mainly my family. I didn't have anybody else in the United States. My family was here. I have cousins about my same age. So, it was very easy to relate to them, from the standpoint of being around the same age, same interests. I learned a lot from them. They were a guide for me during my first years here in the United States, where pretty much you have to start [over]. It's like a new life; you start living again, because you grew up in Cuba, and basically, the only thing that you learned in Cuba is basic survival instincts. You don't have a bank account. You don't have a telephone in your house. You don't have a credit card. You don't go to any of those places. Pretty much, it's like you reinvent yourself and learn the language and start learning life, since you were a little kid, I guess when you grow up in America. It's first steps, baby steps, slowly, slowly, until it took a few years for me to get accustomed to living in this country and get used to the way that things are done, because it's a totally different system. In Cuba, you have a way and it's one way and this is what you take. In the United States, it's like a branch; it's a tree with different branches. You can choose pathways, and you choose one way or another one. Some people make wrong decisions, and they dearly pay for it. So, I was lucky that I had some guidance, and I made the right decisions. I was able to still enjoy a great life over here.

JD: Did you struggle finding employment when you came here?

RP: Well, back in 1994, there was no real trouble finding employment. The unemployment rate was pretty low. It was the years of the [Bill] Clinton administration, and this country was doing very good. Pretty much, I stayed within my field, and I was able to find employment with ease. I never really suffered from that. I'm very happy.

JD: That's good. Were there any major events that happened in the U.S. that really shaped you, like 9/11 or something like that?

RP: Yes. Well, the different events that really made a difference for me, the first one was, unfortunately, a couple of my relatives died in the first couple of years I was here. So, that affected me mentally greatly, because until now, everybody was fine. So, when I came to this country, I'm the only new person here, and then, all of a sudden, a lot of bad things start happening. It didn't define me or shape me, but it shook me mentally. It put me in a place that I was very concerned. I felt really bad. I was thinking that maybe I came over here and people start dying. So, that's one of the things.

Another one was when I graduated from school back in 2000. It was a great day of happiness for me. So, I started a new career, which is still pretty much what I've been doing since the year 2000, twenty-one years and counting, and that makes the whole difference in my life. It started a new chapter in my life, pretty much.

Like you said, after 9/11, unfortunately, such a terrorist attack, then you always think about what could happen, if that could happen again, even though the government takes measures and [does]

changes to try to avoid things like that. But it brought a lot of changes to the way that we live. Here, in New Jersey, you saw how many companies moved from New York; they didn't want to be in the New York area anymore because New York was a target. What can I tell you? It was a very significant event that did affect me to a point. Not that I was scared to go places, but it gave me an inner-thinking about sometimes, "Should I go here? Should I do that?" So, it was like [second-guessing] sometimes.

JD: What was it like being a Cuban migrant in New Jersey?

RP: Being a Cuban migrant in New Jersey, I would say it was a great experience. There's a great Cuban community in the State of New Jersey, the second-largest in the United States after Florida. We've got to thank all the Cubans that came here at the beginning of the Castro Revolution in the early '50s and even before that, some of them, and they paved the way for everybody else that came in later on. That was so easy because I could basically go to the Spanish supermarket. There were a lot of businesses that spoke Spanish, contrary to when this first wave of immigrants came to America, they didn't have none of that. So, they had to learn the hard way. Unfortunately, they had a lot of problems, but for me, the way was already paved. The road was paved for me. The only thing I needed to do was my part, which means put your effort [in], study, and follow what you want to do. There's no other country like this one that could afford you the opportunities to go to school, to find jobs. In many other places, of course, you wouldn't be able to do it.

JD: Now, we're going to shift a little more towards family. How did you meet your wife?

RP: Well, my wife, I met her at a hospital, when I used to work at St. Michael's Hospital in Newark. I was still going to school at nighttime. I worked a three-to-eleven shift as a critical care tech, doing a combination of nursing assistant, phlebotomies, helping the nurses. I used to go to school in the morning from eight to two-fifteen. So, it was sixteen hours of work daily, pretty much Monday through Friday. But, luckily, I still found time to find my wife over there. You know what I mean? So, I found her there. She was a nurse. She's still a nurse there at St. Michael's Medical Center.

JD: What was it like being introduced to Filipino culture?

RP: Filipino culture, to a point, is very similar to Spanish culture in the values that we share, mainly because they're very family-oriented people, like we Spanish are. We pretty much share all that. We have also in common the religion; we're Catholics. So, we had a common ground on that, a common point. Food-wise, Filipino food, they have some things that are similar to Spanish, not many, but a lot of the things that they eat, we also eat. So, it wasn't a big adjustment for me to get involved in the Filipino community or with Filipino friends. It was simple.

JD: How do you try to influence your children with Cuban culture?

RP: I have been trying to influence my children and keep my culture from the get-go [laughter], first, because it's very important that they know the roots. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to

visit Cuba because, as a socialist country, it's very difficult for Americans to visit. That's number one. Number two, I tried to influence them, mainly through spending [time] with my family. I have all my cousins, my aunts, uncles, so we visit them a lot. We visit Spanish supermarkets. We go to a lot of Cuban restaurants. We eat Cuban food. Culturally, that's what they have gotten the most of. Unfortunately, they haven't been able to speak Spanish fluently, which I was trying to do since they were small. In our house, we have to speak English because my wife doesn't speak Spanish. For them, it wasn't an additional bonus point that we would be speaking Spanish in the house so that it would be easier for them to learn. So, I feel a little bit bad about that, and I could have pressured them a little bit more to learn at an earlier age. But there's some stuff that you cannot fix now. I do always tell them that they shouldn't forget their roots, both of them. Of course, they're born American. That's their first thing. They know the American way of life, but they always have to remember their roots, that they are a combination of Cuban and Filipino.

JD: How would you describe the community where you lived and raised your family?

RP: I believe that we have had a very good community since they were born. We've been living here in Belleville. It's a multicultural area, so you see people of all walks of life, professionals, blue-collar workers. Everybody shares the same places, playgrounds, or sports, whatever you get involved with. The experience has been very good. The kids, growing up, they have a lot of friends from school, from sports. They've been able to experience all the types of cultures with the friends that they have made through the years in school and things like that. There's places that we're [able] to visit here in the metropolitan area, so close to New York. I think it's been a great experience for them and for us as a family overall.

JD: Where do you work now?

RP: I work at RWJBarnabas Health, specifically at Saint Barnabas Medical Center, which now is called Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center, thanks to a donation of Mr. Leon Cooperman, [who] donated a hundred million dollars to the hospital. In honoring him, the hospital switched the name to Cooperman.

JD: You are a cardiovascular technician, correct?

RP: Yes, technologist, yes.

JD: Why did you choose that career?

RP: I chose to be a cardiovascular technologist because mainly the cardiac part of it. I've always been very intrigued by the heart and the ins and outs of how it works, the mechanical, the electrical part of the heart. The job that I do right now allows me to learn a lot about it, doing ultrasound of the heart, doing echocardiograms. I've been involved in new cutting-edge technologies that have been happening in the medical field in recent years that involve cardiovascular technologies, with the implantation of a valve inside the heart through the groin, through an artery. We're present during the test. An occlusion device that are placed inside the heart, we're doing through also echocardiograms; we're present there. The field has expanded a

lot since I first graduated in the year 2000. Pretty much, I feel very rewarded when I do the job because, unfortunately, when you find people that have problems, it's sad. It's a sad part of the story. But then you find something and the person has a chance to a new life through [life]-saving procedures, it's been rewarding that you were part of that. You were [instrumental in] that moment that made it possible for that person to get better down the road.

JD: Is that what you would say you enjoy most about your work, or do you have anything else that you really like?

RP: Pretty much that. That's what I enjoyed the most, seeing people get better after they get open-heart surgeries, valve surgeries, that we found their problem. Fortunately, we found it, but if we don't find it, they're going to have bigger problems down the road. That way, they can get fixed, and then they can go on with life and continue, because patients are like you and I. It could be anybody in my family. It's a rewarding experience to see how people get better.

JD: How has the pandemic affected your work life?

RP: The work life was affected to a point, not greatly. We continued to work in the hospital. The hospital is a 24/7 facility. We were always working, even though there were a lot of services that were suspended at the hospital during the peak of the pandemic, from March to the beginning of summer, in June of the year 2020. Our echocardiography lab at Saint Barnabas remained open, and we continued working, not on outpatient service. We didn't do any outpatient work. But we still continued doing our echocardiograms on the in-patients. You have to realize that a lot of the patients that were affected by COVID-19 developed clotting disorders that, unfortunately, were then developing clots inside the heart. So, we did a lot of echoes on these patients that had COVID because a lot of them developed clots and we'd find it, so that changes the way that they get treated. So, we were like a vital point during all that process.

JD: How would you say the pandemic affected your home life, since both you and your wife are in the medical field?

RP: Very little because we continued our life working. She is a nurse. Now, it did increase the stress level, for sure. We could have stressful days at work because it's a hospital, and there are emergencies. You're running around and this and that. But you were also concerned that you could contract a deadly disease. When you are working during the time of COVID, it was scary times, because the virus had a great difference in how a person could be affected. You could have the virus and don't have any symptoms and not even know you have it, and you could have the virus and die. It doesn't matter the age. Of course, the older you are and the more complications and disease comorbidities that you have, the greater the chance that you have to develop complications and you could die. But even a lot of the people that never had any problems and were healthy also died, which is unfortunate. So, it did increase the level of stress that I used to [have at] work every day, until we got the vaccinations. I got the vaccine back in January 2021. It really gave me a boost of confidence to perform my work, even though I was protected with PPEs, personal [protective] equipment, but still, you always second guess anything that can happen when you do an ultrasound that could take you half an hour inside a room, locked in there with a patient that has a COVID, and they're coughing and doing this and

doing that. You always have that concern that you could be infected. Luckily, I have never contracted the virus, and hopefully, I won't. I got my vaccinations, and I'm ready for the booster.

JD: Yes, me too. How does it feel working in the medical field in the U.S. compared to Cuba?

RP: Well, it's a day and night difference, working in a developed country, and pretty much Cuba I would consider almost like a third-world country. The way that the infrastructure is in Cuba, the way that the socioeconomic aspect is, the way that the medicine is, it's about a third-world country level. So, it's a big difference. It's a big difference how the two systems work. One is a socialist system. One is a capitalist system. Even [if] you're in a capitalist country like America, if you don't have health insurance, you still can go to any hospital you want, and the hospital has the obligation to see you and meet you in the hospital if you have to or see you in the emergency room if you have to. So, that's not a deterrent for people when they're sick to go to the hospital and seek help. In Cuba, unfortunately, we lack a lot of facilities. We lack a lot of medical equipment. I remember, working back in Cuba, sometimes we'd have to wait until they would sterilize the gloves. You couldn't go to the emergency room and see a patient that had a wound on the arm that you wanted to suture and close it, because you didn't have gloves. You had to wait until they were put in an autoclave to be sterilized and then use it. Things that you don't see in a country [that's] developed, not just the United States, but any other country. So, it's a stark difference.

Here, any hospital, even though it's a community hospital, they have the ways, not to do sophisticated procedures, but to do the most basic procedures. They do ultrasounds, CAT scans, MRIs. In Cuba, you don't find that. They do provide a lot of the high services, but for patients that come from other countries and pay in dollars. Unfortunately, it's like two different medical systems in Cuba, one for the Cubans and one for the tourists. If you go as a tourist from another country to Cuba to have eye surgery, you stay in a different hospital than a Cuban person will stay, and you have all stuff different than a Cuban person will have. I, unfortunately, had the experience with some of my relatives that died when I was here in the United States. They died back in Cuba. They were horrific events, the way that they developed and the way that the healthcare system, you saw the way things happened. You'd scratch your head and say, "How is it possible that you cannot have a blood test? How is that possible?" Something that is so fundamental here that you can do it anywhere, you can go to LabCorps, you can go to LabQuest, and have blood tests everywhere you want. In Cuba, just for that, it's a problem. It's a completely different experience. The amount of medications that we have in this country, in Cuba, you go to a pharmacy and pretty much, it's bare. You can look, and there's nothing over there. A lot of the medication was restricted, even aspirin. You were allocated x-amount of aspirin for a year. When you exceed that, you cannot buy any more aspirin. People don't know how living in Cuba actually is until they really experience it. Like any other sector, healthcare is greatly affected by that, unfortunately.

JD: Is there anything you miss about Cuba?

RP: Yes. I miss the weather, even though I do like the changes of [seasons] that we have. I don't enjoy winter at all. It's very harsh. I miss the weather, mild tropical climate all year round. I miss a lot of my old friends from back in Cuba. Sometimes, I do miss the simple life of just

riding my bicycle and don't have to worry about having a car, or take it to the car dealer, buy this part, change the oil, do this. In Cuba, you don't have none of that because most of the people don't have cars. I didn't have a car. I had a bicycle. But the simple life, sometimes I miss the simple life. Here, in the United States, life could be very complicated. In between, school, work, trips over here, take your kid to a doctor, or go over there, everything is far away. When you grew up in a small town like I did, everything is close by. I didn't experience so much of what's going on there right now, because right now, the situation is really bad. I never really internalized how bad it could be, because I really never experienced this until after I left. That's when I know about the stories of family members and friends that have family members, how much they're suffering over there. When you're a kid, the only thing you care [about] is having a good time and enjoying and spending your time on the street with your friends. So, you don't look at life as an adult. Now, when you grow up there as an adult, then you have a lot of responsibility towards your family. That's when you have a lot of hard times. But I do miss sometimes the simple life. I do.

JD: Well, if you were to go back to Cuba, what would you miss most about living in the U.S.?

RP: What do I miss most about living in the U.S.? I will have to say I would miss a lot of things. I would like to go to Cuba for a short vacation--I miss the simple life--for a few days. But if you transplant any person that's been living in the United States for a certain amount of time and put them back in Cuba, it's going to be like *Survivor*. If you watch one of those episodes of *Survivor*, it will be similar to that, because [from] the morning until the nighttime, living the Cuban life is an experience. You have to see what you're going to eat for breakfast. You've got to see what are you going to make for lunch? What are you going to eat? Are you going to be able to eat, or you're not going to be able to eat? Are you going to have shoes, or you're not going to have shoes? All this I tell you is stuff that we take for granted that we don't have over there. I will definitely miss being used to when I need a piece of bread, [I] go to the supermarket and buy it, stuff that you cannot do in Cuba. When I need something from the pharmacy, I go to the pharmacy and get it, because you most likely will go to the pharmacy to buy something and they won't have it. Things like that, you will miss greatly and it will be very hard to adapt back to living that type of life.

When you're in Cuba, you get used to what you have. We're always inventing. *Inventar* in *español* is "inventing." It's a way of life in Cuba. You have to invent your way through the day. What do you do for later? It's not like here, [where] we go to the supermarket and shop for a week. You don't have that in Cuba. There's no supermarkets that you go and shop for a week and you buy meat and you buy chicken. Everything has most likely gone through the illegal black market. So, you have to know people that know people to buy things and do it all in an illegal way. So, I would miss what we consider most of the essential stuff that we do here, it would be considered [rare] back in Cuba.

JD: What would you say have been your greatest accomplishments?

RP: My family. That's the greatest accomplishment that a person that is family-oriented can have. Having a family and being able to enjoy it and spend time with it, I think, is the main goal for anybody that is a family-oriented person. You could be a mom; you could be a dad. For

kids, they don't understand that part yet until they grow up and become adults and start to have families of their own. But I think that having a family is the greatest accomplishment that I've ever had.

JD: Well, those are all the questions I have. Do you have any other pieces of information you want to share or any particular stories?

RP: If I tell you stories, then we'll spend the whole day.

JD: If you have a story in mind, because we're only at thirty-four minutes, we can have more time.

RP: Let me think. Pick a topic, and I'll tell you if I can tell you a story.

JD: Do you have one off the top of your head?

RP: A story about Cuba? I can tell you stories about my time as a college student, which you are right now, a college student. I went to it's called *Instituto Superior de Ciencias Medicas de Villa Clara*, which, in other words, translates to medical school in Villa Clara, which is a province of Cuba located in the central region. Even though I was born in Havana, I grew up in a town that was called Caibarién, [which] is on the north coast of Cuba, fifty-four kilometers from the school. It was a great time as a college student. It was a lot of hard work because you are in the medical field, so you have school all day. School in Cuba is a little bit different than in America. We don't have so many career paths, it's a lot more limited, but medicine being one of the largest ones in Cuba--no, the largest one. It's totally different to the way that college is here. Here, you get to pick your class, and you get to pick your teacher; you get to pick your days. In Cuba, you go to school every day. When you're in medical school, most likely, it could be similar in the United States; I'm not so sure when they are doing the pre-requirements.

I remember my days, going back, getting up. There were hard times because transportation was really bad in Cuba. I remember my sister [and I] went to medical school together, so we went to the same medical school. She's two years older than I. We used to go and leave together to try to catch the bus or the train to go to that town, Santa Clara, which was where the school was. To be there at school at eight in the morning, we had to get up at four-thirty in the morning. So, we'd just get a little bit of milk or brown sugar with a piece of bread, and you go about your day and try to make it on time, get to the train station or bus station, and try to catch another bus to go to school. Then, you spend the whole day over there in the school. Some days, I will stay at the school because I had my dorm. Somedays, I will come back to town. Coming back to town was another experience; you could be sometimes three or four hours on the highway, hitchhiking or go to the terminal, trying to get a bus, and that can be two, three hours with no bus going to your town.

After you see the way that college students, aside from the point of how hard you had to study, because that could pretty much be the same for students in America or in any other country. When you're in college, you have to study. Careers are difficult. Nobody's going to just give it to you; you have to work for it. My time was so limited to study due to the transportation

problem. I had to really get up really early and then stay late at night. I tried to study when I'd come home because those two, three hours that I wasted on transportation, I could have been using it to study. So, it's a big stark difference. I just think [of] the days when I did that for six years. Here they said, "How would people survive when you're so used to so [many] commodities and comfort?" That's totally the way that we grew up. The way that we did things really, I believe, it makes you a person that could be very resilient in life. It gives you toughness. You stand under the rain, catching a truck to bring you to your town. You could be two hours under the sun, ninety-five degrees, with nothing protecting you; you're in the middle of a highway.

Those experiences that you accrue growing up, going to school and all that under those conditions, I think that prepares you for a lot of stuff when you go and become an adult, or when you come to another country like I did. Really, I didn't find anything too daunting for me [that] I couldn't do or it's difficult. If I had to take a bus to go to work, sometimes I just walked from West New York to Palisades Hospital and walked back up the hill because it wasn't a big deal to me because I'm used to that. When people, if they don't have their car, they don't really know what to do. [If] you're talking about long distances, yes, you're going to need the car for things like that.

Basically, the way I grew up, the way that I was shaped since I was a kid, unfortunately, having so many of the misfortunes [of] growing up in a poor country, that we didn't have a lot of basic stuff, it makes you grow up stronger and resilient and makes things a lot easier when you come to another place. You do have a hard time because you have to learn the language and it's a new way of life with so many things, but just for perseverance and having the desire to do things and better yourself, it's a very significant thing that makes a lot of the stuff that I accomplished in this country a lot easier. Unfortunately, when you grow up over here, it's always said when you grow up used to something--it cannot just be in the United States, it could be in any other country, I'm not saying for people in this country only--but in any other country that you have everything from the beginning, you don't know how difficult it is for other people just to acquire a pair of shoes, a pair of sneakers. I have some pairs of shoes that lasted me for six, seven, eight, nine years after I grew up. I kept them, because you don't have any other ones. It's the same shoes you take to school, that you go out to the park, the ones that you go out to play [with]. You bring it to the shoe store repair because you cannot really buy any other shoes, things like that. So, nothing discourages you. You look at life with a different lens.

[There are] lots of opportunities when you arrive in this country. So, that's why you see how a lot of immigrants in this country become very successful. They accomplish a lot, and they go to college, and they want to do this, they want to do that, because the parents left, a lot of times, a very different life. They tell them. So, I guess you learn how to appreciate how great this country is and how many opportunities it can afford you, if you actually take advantage of it. So, that's a story that I want to tell you, the difference in what makes a lot of the people that come to this country as immigrants so successful. If you look at the amount of college students that are from immigrant families, it's very, very high, because they see it as having the opportunity that their family never did or they couldn't do, and they understand it.

JD: Do you have any words of advice for the people?

RP: I definitely do. I have so much advice to give. When you grow up, and you go through certain phases of your life, you're a kid, then you're a teenager, you're an adult, become an adult, now I'm a middle-aged man, right in the middle, you get to accrue a lot of experience through different things in life, good and bad. Life is a bag. You have a balance; one with good and one with the bad. I will advise people that if you are in college, don't waste a minute of it. Enjoy it, but with a level of responsibility. As I said, college in this country is totally different than when I went, but I see it because I've been in this country for many years. You are in college. My daughter is in college. Enjoy your life as a student because it will never be the same. Enjoy your life in college, but do it responsibly because any bad decision you take could carry over for the rest of your life. You know what I mean? People have to realize when they go to study that that's the primary reason they're in college, to study. When you have free time, then you enjoy it. You're going to have those opportunities. You're going to go and catch a football game. You're going to go hang out with your friends. You're going to go and have parties. But how much of that you do, you have to do it in a way that won't affect your primary reason why you're there.

Unfortunately, if you look at statistics, close to forty percent of students drop out of college after the first year because they think that college might be an easy thing to do. College is not an easy thing to do. If you want to be successful in college, then you have to really work. You have to work for it. Even though some careers are easier than other ones, it still requires you to be focused and do your work. In your free time, then you could enjoy it. You should enjoy it because when you become an adult, you're going to have different responsibilities. You're going to have a family, and you're going to have a job that's going to require a lot more. You think [being] a student is hard. It's going to be a lot harder, because it [impacts] so many other angles of your life that you won't know until you're facing it. So that's [some] of the advice that I have for students. Focus on your career, enjoy your time, but do it responsibly.

Also, don't get discouraged. Don't get discouraged. You always look at life and I look at life with a half-full glass that always things could be better. You're going to have problems. You're going to have disappointments. You're going to have letdowns. But you cannot let that define you as a person, or as a worker, or as a student. Those are things that are temporary in life, and they will pass, and other things will come. So, you can never hang yourself [on] something that happened in the past and let it affect your life, that was something negative. So, be resilient always. Be tough. Because as I tell my daughter, life is tough. It's required for you to start looking at it in a different way. You have to go through it. If other people did it, there's no way that you cannot do it. So, I always have that word of encouragement. If somebody can do it, I can do it. Maybe not as good as them, but I can do it. Or I can do it better. You always have to have that peace of mind, so you could be successful in life. Hopefully, it's good advice.

JD: I think it's very good advice.

RP: Take it from somebody that came here with nothing, with empty hands. It could be done.

JD: Well, that's all I have for today. Thank you so much for giving me your time and giving us your life story.

RP: That is not a problem at all. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be part of your study. Hopefully, it will be something that could be useful if somebody ever listens or reads it. Some encouragement as a story of uplifting, the American Dream is still alive. This country has problems like every other country has, but still, there's no other place like America to make up your life. Grow up in this country and enjoy everything that it can give you, always with moderation because that's key in life. Moderation is always key for everything.

JD: Yes. Okay. Thank you.

RP: You're welcome.

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

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 5/9/2022
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 5/24/2022
Reviewed by Rafael Perez 8/1/2022