RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MERCEDES VALLE

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

AZIEL ROSADO

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY
JULY 13, 2018

TRANSCRIPT BY

AZIEL ROSADO

Aziel Rosado: Hello, this is Aziel Rosado, and today I will be interviewing ...

Mercedes Valle: Dr. Mercedes Valle.

AR: The time is currently two-thirty PM, and the date is Friday, July 13, 2018. Let us begin. Let me begin by asking when and where were you born.

MV: I was born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, and I came to the United States to Newark, New Jersey at the age of six.

AR: What were your parents' names?

MV: My mother's name was Gregoria, and my father's name was Herminio. They are very strange names to me, so my daughter researched it because I wanted to know where those names came from. She did the DNA testing. She found out that those were names that their family members had.

AR: Where were they born? Were they also born in Arecibo?

MV: They were born in Arecibo in the area called Dominguito.

AR: Do you know what they did for a living?

MV: My father was a cook, and my mother was a housewife. She never really worked.

AR: Do you know how they met?

MV: No, I know they met in Puerto Rico somewhere, and I don't know what happened.

AR: You said that you came to the United States at the age of six.

MV: Yes, my mother kept me home the first year. We came in October, and my mother kept me home for a year because she didn't want the three of us--there were three of us--to go to school without learning some English first. She kept us home that whole academic year, and we started the following year, second grade. My sister was in first grade, and my brother was in kindergarten.

AR: What was the push factor to migrate from Puerto Rico to here or, more specifically, to Newark?

MV: Well, my father had really come to the United States, and he used to work in the tobacco industry in Massachusetts. Somehow--I don't know how--he found his way to Newark. Then, I guess, when he found an apartment, and we could come, he sent for us. We came later on, after he had been here like a year or two. He cut tobacco. Like I said, my mother didn't have a job.

My mother actually helped my aunt in Puerto Rico, household, cooking, like a servant really. [laughter] Yes, so we were poor.

AR: Can you tell me a little about your experience growing up in Newark when you first came here?

MV: Well, when I first came, we were frightened, of course. This was a new country, a new place, a new language, new culture. We were very young. Like I said, I was six going on seven, and my sister and brother were younger. We were really starting out school, the three of us, together. I had gone to first grade in Puerto Rico. I started here second grade. We were initially scared. We were a little frightened because everything was so different. Then, my mother didn't allow us to go to school that year, which in a way was good because we got to be at home and just do things that we wanted to do. It was bad in the sense that we were missing out on education. My mother and father struggled a lot because my father was a cook. He wasn't making a lot of money, and my mother didn't work. She didn't have any skills. She had only gone to seventh grade. She didn't have any skills to really find a job at that time, so for a while she stayed home, and we only lived on my dad's income.

AR: Can you tell us a little more about your experience in school? Did you run into a lot of other Latinos?

MV: When I went to school in Newark, there were not a lot of Latinos. When we started school, there were not a lot of Latinos. We lived on the first floor on Mulberry Street in Newark, and there was another Latino family on the second floor. They had already been in school, and they were much more situated. So, I have to say that they helped us a lot in terms of understanding the school system. They would lend me books to read. They would help us a lot because we didn't speak English the first year. We were home most of the time.

Being in school, I did feel different. Most of the population was Italian at that time in Newark. Some of them were nice. Other people were prejudiced, and they did not seek us out a lot or anything. With that family on the second floor, that support system that I felt we had, that really made a difference for us, for my brother and my sister, who were also struggling with the new culture and in a place that--Newark at that time, that was in the late '50s, was very racist. There were signs all over the city in Newark where it said, "Apartment for rent. Whites only." I used to get shocked at that because I'm like, "What does that mean?" I didn't understand that, but that kept me thinking that there was something that was wrong.

AR: Since you noted that, did you ever experience any instances of racism towards yourself or towards a family member?

MV: Well, what happened was that as I got older, my brother was struggling hard in school. What I saw throughout my life was that the males had a much harder time in the school, Latino males, than the females. Somehow the females, maybe they're easier, or they were softer, or I don't know. That whole racist thing against the males was very evident to the point where my brother never wanted to go to school. He did not have a good life from the time he got here to

the United States. He left school at an early age. He started drinking, he became an alcoholic, and he died at the age of thirty-two. I'm sure that my brother had a lot of difficulties that he just never shared with us because he was very quiet and withdrawn. I always felt that there was something wrong, but I wasn't the psychologist at the time. I knew something wasn't right with him, but nobody sought to explore it. They could have put him in a special class if he was delayed or whatever, but that didn't happen either. So, my brother really never felt of a part of a classroom, a part of school, anything. Eventually, he dropped out, found his own friends, started hanging in the streets, and just didn't make it.

AR: That concept of struggling in school, was that with you and all of your siblings? Did you all struggle?

MV: No, my sister and I did a little better. We found friends in school, maybe two or three of the Latinos that lived not far from us. We connected, my sister and I, with other young kids. We got together and we used to have social activities, but we had racism right in our block. The people across the street would never talk to us because the only two families of color on that block were our family and the family way on the other side, which were African Americans. They were all whites in the neighborhood. There were a few Latinos on Orchard Street, Broad Street, but you had to cross the highway. Eventually, we made friends with those families, and we were able to make connections.

AR: When did you first start working?

MV: I started working really at the age of fourteen. I used to babysit for a Latino family that lived four blocks away. They had a little baby, and they needed somebody to take care of the baby. So, I worked five days of the week for fifteen dollars a week. Since I was born, I think I was doing some kind of work. [laughter] I've been a worker all my life.

AR: Were there any other jobs other than the babysitting?

MV: Yes, after being in the public school, when I got to the sixth grade, I went to a church called St. Columba, where I met this wonderful priest. It was like he adopted a group of us. He took care of us. He would pay our tuition bill. He would buy us clothes. He became that father figure, and I think that he made a difference in my life because I felt like my father wasn't always there. My father was an alcoholic, so it was not always good at home. He would take us to see the Statue of Liberty, out to dinner. He became the father figure not only for me but about fifteen of us. He would pick us up on Sundays, take us out, just do all the extra things that parents can do or should do. My parents just didn't have the money or the know-how. They knew how to feed us. They knew that we needed a meal; we needed to be clean. In terms of social activities, we didn't have a lot of that, so that's why this priest [was important]. Then, I went to Catholic school for two years. There, I met some other Latinos. We got together, and we were able to do things. One of the nuns introduced me to McCrory's, which used to be a five and ten store in downtown Newark, and I had asked her for a job. She sent me to her aunt, and they gave me a job. I worked at McCrory's for eighty-five cents an hour selling men's underwear. [laughter]

AR: Do you remember the name of the priest?

MV: Yes, Reverend James McFarland.

AR: Where did you go to college?

MV: I went to college. I started out at Essex County College here in Newark. When I graduated, I was put into a secretarial program because nobody ever came to me and said I had college potential, nobody. I didn't know what to do after high school, so I went to work local jobs, being a clerk or a secretary. Somebody at work (a wonderful African-American coworker) told me that the college was opening up in Newark, Essex County College. He said I should apply because I was very smart. I applied, and I got in. So, I went to Essex County College for a while, and then I transferred to Livingston, Rutgers. From there, I have my bachelor's. Then, I went to Seton Hall, and I went to the University of Massachusetts, where I got my doctorate.

AR: What made you decide that you wanted to transfer to Livingston College?

MV: I went through ASPIRA, and ASPIRA had a very good counselor named Carlos. Carlos introduced me to college applications. We applied to a couple of colleges. I got into a couple of colleges, but I chose Livingston mostly because of the distance. I wanted to be able to come home sometimes. I didn't want to be that far from my family. Then, when I got there and met such beautiful, wonderful professors and people, that's where I really began to feel a sense of true identity. I wanted to study while I was there about being Puerto Rican and getting involved in things that were important to our lives. [Editor's Note: Established in 1961, ASPIRA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Hispanic youth succeed in education and leadership.]

AR: Were you involved in any organizations on campus?

MV: Yes, I was involved in the Puerto Rican Organization. I lived in the dorms, too, so we were at the Puerto Rican House at Livingston. I got involved with the Puerto Rican Student Organization. We had many battles there for our rights. We took over the president's office. We put the Puerto Rican flag up there in his office on George Street. I also belonged to Guazabara, which was a theater group formed by Victor Fragoso, one of the professors. The focus of the group was to present issues affecting Puerto Ricans in the United States and Puerto Rico. We wrote fifteen plays and performed them throughout the country, and it was highly, highly received. I learned so much from the professors there about my true identity. When I was in high school, I did not feel comfortable about being Puerto Rican because Italians had such a powerful impact on us that we felt almost uncomfortable. That's when the Puerto Ricans and the Italians were fighting. That's when the movie *West Side Story* came out, and that's really the way it was. I guess Italians were threatened by the Puerto Ricans coming in the same area where they were living.

AR: You said that you took over the president's office.

MV: We were fighting for rights on the Livingston Campus, so we marched down George Street. We walked over to the president's office. We went to his office. We put the Puerto Rican flag, and we demanded rights.

AR: What was his response to that?

MV: I think we followed up with letters and meetings and things like that, but we were very active on campus and very well-known just like the other groups. The African Americans had their house, too, and they also fought. Sometimes we worked together just because we were on campus. We were making sure that we got the things that we needed, professors, everything that we felt was necessary. We did it as a group, as a united group.

AR: Do you remember any specific instances when you would work together with any African American organizations, or was it just in general you guys would go support one another?

MV: Right, we would support one another, but we had our own Puerto Rican House, so we kind of stayed there most of the time. We did go to different events with other groups, but mostly we did Puerto Rican things.

AR: Were there any other Latino organizations on campus at that time?

MV: I don't remember. Maybe there was, but I don't recall.

AR: This is kind of fast forwarding, were you around for the Newark Puerto Rican Riots of 1974?

MV: Yes, I lived here in Newark at the time of the riots, and I saw a lot of destruction. I belonged to a group in Newark, too, another youth Latino, Puerto Rican youth group that started with Ramon Rivera, who was the founder of *La Casa*, which is one of the largest Latino organizations in the country now. They provide a lot of social services. He was the founder. We organized, and we would go out and do different protests during the riots. So, I saw a lot of destruction in Newark. It was kind of a scary time, too, but people were out there. [Editor's Note: Founded in 1972, *La Casa de Don Pedro*, named for Puerto Rican activist Pedro Albizu Campos, provides community services in Newark. Ramon Rivera served as the group's first executive director. On September 1, 1974, mounted police clashed with Puerto Ricans celebrating *Las Fiestas Patronales* in Branch Brook Park in Newark. Puerto Rican protesters then marched on City Hall. The events are known as the Puerto Rican Riots of 1974.]

AR: When they first occurred, did you know why specifically or what specifically was going on, because there was a lot going on at the time?

MV: Well, we knew that there was a lot of discrimination in Newark because Newark also was not a Latino city like it is now, or African American. Back then in Newark, it was predominantly a Jewish community. All the stores, Downtown Newark, Springfield Avenue were predominantly Jewish. Everything was really whites. Puerto Ricans and African

Americans had no power here. You could see the signs that people wrote on the walls, "A brother," all the different slogans. A lot of places had to close down. It became a dead city after a while because what happened was everybody moved out. Everybody became terrified. They left the city; we stayed.

AR: Were you involved in the community in Newark, in any organizations?

MV: I was involved with the Latino organization there. Then, when I went to Essex County College, we were involved there with the youth organization just to organize and to look at what we were doing and to improve conditions because the college was also predominately white. There were not Latino professors or anything. I didn't really get exposure to Latino professors until I went to Livingston College. Even at Essex, there just were not a lot. There was nobody there to teach you history. That's why, for me, it was just so exciting and so emotional to have people who taught me about my history, my culture. We even did a trip to Puerto Rico with the professor who took us around the island to different places, we'd meet important people, understand more of the culture and the history. That's why I go to Puerto Rico all the time now. I feel the connection. Although I didn't get to live there a lot, I feel very connected to the island.

AR: This coincides with my next question, what connections have you maintained with the island? Do you still have a lot of family out there?

MV: I still have family, but a lot of them are deceased now. I have personal friends there now, and cousins that I visit. I try to go on a regular basis and just connect. I have been in touch with Maria Canino, who is a professor at Rutgers. During the time of this storm--not the most recent one, but the one that was Maria--I went to my church. I'm the chief trustee of my church now since I attended way back. I have a very important role in the church now, and I am sort of like one of the leaders. So, I had a drive, food and money drive, and I collected funds. I sent them to Maria Canino for a group called ENLACE, which basically helps the families that got torn apart by the storm, and we sent them money. I'm also involved here in Newark with the Newark Public Library, the Hispanic Research Group. I do a lot of work with families that need help because their children are struggling in school. I am a school psychologist, so I do a lot of work with Latino families, basically, to tell them their rights, to help them understand what they can and can't do in terms of resolving issues at school. Most of the population I have served here in Newark has been Latino, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Ecuadorians who come here and really don't know what a school district is like or what are their rights. I don't see that the school does anything to emphasize that they have rights as parents, so that's my big issue right now that I'm working with. [Editor's Note: In September 2017, category five Hurricane Maria ravaged Puerto Rico, causing many casualties and significant damage.]

AR: Before, you said that in Newark there were mostly Italians. As we know, now there is a lot more Latinos. Do you remember any specific time when the population demographics started to shift?

MV: Yes, right after the riots. Right after the riots, which I think were in ‘68 [1967], everybody started moving out, so the population in Newark changed drastically.

AR: Going back to Hurricane Maria, how did you experience Hurricane Maria? Did you have family out there at the time?

MV: I have family out there. They pretty much survived. Because I care about the island, I ran a couple of activities in the church. We collected money and food. Like I said, I sent it to Maria Canino, who was one of the professors at Rutgers. She taught me Puerto Rican history.

AR: Going back a little further, how did you get to be involved with the Puerto Rican Student Organization? Did you have a friend in there, or did you just know that it was an organization that you wanted to join?

MV: Well, they publicized it. The people who started it were recruiting, so they talked about the organization, the purpose. I definitely was interested because I knew it was for the betterment of Latinos.

AR: Do you remember who those people were?

MV: Yes, Elias Rivera, Margie [Rivera], Elizabeth Rivera, a bunch of us. I forgot all their names. Some of them were part of that theater group, too, that we formed with Victor Fragoso. That was just another way of focusing on Puerto Rican issues in the United States. We had a lot of good guidance by the Puerto Rican professors there. They stayed on us, and they made sure that we did well. They didn't just see you for class. If they had to come to your room and wake you up because you didn't go to class, they would show up in your room and knock on the door.

AR: Your professors were more than just professors. They were more involved in your life.

MV: Yes, they were involved in our everyday lives. They knew what we did. They reprimanded us. They became like our parents, too, because we didn't have our parents there.

AR: Do you have a husband?

MV: I was married to a man from Pakistan for twelve years, and we got divorced. Prior to that, I have a daughter, Melissa, from an African American male that was very much a part of my life and who taught me a lot to because he was a social activist at the time. So, he was encouraging along the way because he had an amount of awareness that was extremely high. He also helped along the way with our conversations and the issues going on and always being aware and taking a stand. I've always taken a stand on things that affect us and things that affect human beings as a whole because this earth is for all of us, not just for a few of us. That's what I tell my students, "We have to share it and be nice about it."

AR: Do you have any other children?

MV: No, I just have one daughter. That's enough. [laughter] She was a full-time job when she was growing up.

AR: Before, you said that your parents knew the basics. Was there anything you took from your experience growing up that affected the way you raised your daughter?

MV: Both her father and I always taught her that she had rights, and we modeled. I think most of what we contributed to her was how we modeled our lives around issues affecting Latinos and African Americans and standing up and being a fighter, not saying, "Yes, yes," to everything that is given to you. You have to question. It's real important to question and to promote change. Even when she went to an all-white school in South Orange, she had a couple of incidents where I had to go to school and speak up for her. One day, they asked her and her African American friends to walk out the back door because they were too loud. So, I went and met with the principal and the vice principal, and I said, "We're not going to have this. I will organize this community and we will come here and we will fight to change that." She sees me as a fighter, and she has definitely taken on that role also. Her work is around space and race and trying to promote what is right for everyone.

AR: We are towards the end of our interview. Do you have any additional comments or information that you would like to share with us?

MV: Yes, I think it's important that young people try to find out about their identity, where they came from, where they are at the present, what is it that they are going to contribute in the now and in the future to keep the rights of people as a priority. Society has an easy way of making people feel inferior or making people feel like that they don't have the value or that they don't have the same qualities or that they're different. By saying different, I mean different in the sense that they're not equal to. I think that young people need to remember that you need to know where you came from, and that's how you will better be able to deal with the present and be able to establish a better future for all those who come after us. I think that's a responsibility that we have.

AR: I would like to thank you for taking the time to conduct this interview. As we noted before, this interview will be transcribed and used for our research of Latinos in New Jersey. Additionally, this interview will be kept in Rutgers Oral History Archive's database. Thank you very much.

MV: Thank you.

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

Transcribed by Aziel Rosado 7/15/2019
Reviewed by Lauren Smith 05/21/2020
Reviewed by Kate Rizzi 6/15/2020
Reviewed by Mercedes Valle 12/7/2020
Reviewed by Kate Rizzi 12/8/2020