

AN INTERVIEW WITH LYNNETTE ARVELO SAWYER

An Oral History Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
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PREFACE



Growing up just one block away from New York’s “Museum Mile” and surrounded by cultures from every corner of the world, it’s easy to say that Lynette Arvelo Sawyer was destined to create her own museum dedicated to the cultures she grew up with. Lynette is a proud Puerto Rican and Afro-Latina from *El Barrio* of East Harlem in New York; her roots extend from the island of Puerto Rico to the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa.

Lynette’s mother was born in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico and her father was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico. Both came to the United States in the 1940s; her mother by plane and her father by boat through Ellis Island. Lynette grew up very close to her parents and in her oral history reflects on the history of her family within the context of the history of Puerto Rico. Her “checkerboard” heritage is a portrait of the racial and cultural diversity that exists within the Latinx community.

Lynette’s career in education stems from her upbringing surrounded by books and mother’s work as an educator. She embraces her cultural heritage as she discusses the history of Puerto Rico, highlighting pre-Columbian history with the Taíno Indians. She takes us down Park Avenue in Manhattan, through the *marketa* she frequented with family and friends exploring the Puerto Rican and Dominican cultures. She speaks fondly of her travels abroad as a student at the State University of New York in Spain and Puerto Rico, which would later become a part of what she imparted as an educator.

After getting married in 1978, she came to Las Vegas for an “eternal honeymoon” with her husband who was stationed at Nellis Air Force Base. Here, she discovered tumbleweed and lived in St. Louis with her husband and three children, Joseph, Marcello, and Isaac. While working as a bilingual interpreter in the Nevada detention system, she witnessed the growth of the Latinx community of Las Vegas through the late 1970s and 1980s, identifying community members such as Isela Gutierrez with Viva Mexico, a folkloric dance group, and Eddie Escobedo, Sr. with *El Tiempo*, the first Latinx newspaper in Las Vegas.

Following her mother’s advice, she became a teacher and found her place in the Clark County School District with the help of her fifth-grade teacher and now Director of the Public Education Foundation, Ms. Judi Steele. From administrator in the Clark County School District to stay connected to her children and devoted to building her community. From first-grade teacher to English Language Learner Facilitator, Lynnette describes the different hats she wore during her time with the district with her goal of building a multicultural and holistic education for students.

A true educator in her manner, Lynnette expanded her classroom to include the Las Vegas community through the Hispanic Museum of Nevada - *La Casa de la Cultura Latina* where she celebrated over twenty-one cultures from Latin America. Taking us to the halls of St. Christopher’s Catholic School in the late 1980s, she builds the story of how the museum was born from a single broken display cabinet that would become the first display she ever made. With the help of locals including Paco Álvarez, Claudia Ferreiro, and Arturo Ochoa her vision expanded from a few cabinets in the Arturo Cambeiro Senior Center to an entire gallery in the Boulevard Mall and a myriad of community events including the Las Vegas Latino Short Film Festival. Her mission was to create a place where families “could learn all of the different aspects of Latino culture and expand their horizons.” For Lynette Sawyer, museums are a place that unite communities across demographics and generations.

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January 3rd, 2019
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

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Lynnette Sawyer 1/3/19
Signature of Narrator Date

Nathalie Martinez 1-3-19
Signature of Interviewer Date

This is Nathalie Martinez. Today is January third, 2019. We're here in the Reading Room at the Lied Library in Special Collections and Archives, and we're here with Lynnette Sawyer and...

Barbara Tabach.

Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez.

Could you please pronounce your name and spell it for me, please?

Lynnette Arvelo Sawyer. L-Y-N-N-E-T-T-E. Arvelo, A-R-V-E-L-O. Sawyer, S-A-W-Y-E-R.

Thank you. Could we start off by you telling us how you identify yourself?

Puerto Rican.

Could we start off with your childhood? Where did you grow up?

I was born and raised in Manhattan-East Harlem, Spanish Harlem, *El Barrio* [different names for the same place] in New York City.

What was it like there growing up?

New York, as you are probably well aware of, is a very diverse, cultured, and worldly place. I was brought up in the Carver Projects, in a Spanish-speaking home, with two sisters, a brother and in a two-parent home. It was a very stable home life, with hard-working parents. I attended Patrick Henry, Public School 171, in a low-socioeconomic area and community, but there was a myriad of knowledge and experiences to garner from the community. Children of many different nationalities lived in the neighborhood, although mostly Hispanics.

The *barrio* and the city in general were full of activities, festivals, and places to enrich your mind. My parents, born and raised in Puerto Rico, took advantage of all the city had to offer. At first glance I think to myself, I don't know how my parents did it; raised us to be

productive individuals, because all four of the children in the home, all of us, graduated from college. We had a lot of odds against us; the neighborhood had all the trappings for failure. I remember growing up, that in each building there were a handful of families that everybody wanted out of the building due to the trouble they brought with them. The building was 15 stories high with nine families on each floor, for a total of 135 families. The most unpleasant memory of living in the projects was the elevator. There was occasionally a smell of urine and if the elevator was not working, residents would have to walk up to their floor. In our case to the ninth floor! The maintenance crew did the best they could mopping the elevators, stairs, hallways. It was not the best neighborhood to grow up in, but it was situated in a thriving, bustling location, and my parents kept us focused. Values, beliefs, traditions, morals, expectations, work ethics and more, were taught by example, not by a lot of discussion.

Culture was a huge part of our upbringing. Both my mother and father loved all things Puerto Rico. They exposed us to all forms of culture, not only ours. Some of the most inspiring and memorable were the Puerto Rican Day parade, with millions of attendees waving flags everywhere, the Puerto Rico Performing Arts Theatre, where I was introduced to artists like Celia Cruz, Tito Puente and more; the Azteca movie theater, where I learned about the Mexican masked *luchadores* and *Cantinflas*; and Lincoln Center, a cultural icon in New York. As a member of the Girl Scouts, a leader invited a few of us to see *West Side Story*, with Rita Moreno! My father took us to the Wednesday Apollo Night, an iconic African American theater, and I remember standing in line with my parents and my youngest sister, to see the Amateur Night Show and James Brown. And finally, we went to Broadway shows and all types of outdoor festivals. Those family “field trips” laid the foundation for understanding and interaction with other cultures. It was a healthy environment with strict boundaries.

As a young girl through high school, I came across friends and other children who didn't have one book in their homes, who had not traveled to different places outside of their neighborhoods, who had not attended a theater production, a museum, a ballet. They stayed in their own vicinity, sometimes even as extreme as on the benches and playground around the projects where they lived. That was the case for some of the families and children in our area. So, I was very blessed to have parents who were enlightened and had loads of common sense. In our home we had a bookcase in the living room. *The* family library. It consisted of old encyclopedias, old books such as *Canterbury Tales*, *Readers Digest* and various other magazines. There was an old card catalogue that transported me to countryside images. My parents enjoyed reading, in particular newspapers. That was a chore any one of the children had. Daily, my sisters, myself or my brother went downstairs to buy two or three newspapers per day, along with milk and bread; *El Diario*, *La Prensa*, *The Daily News*, and *The New York Post*, among others. The encyclopedias were informative. That's how I spent some of my time, reading them, and looking at the illustrations and charts, because there wasn't a lot of TV in those days, in fact, no Spanish TV at all. Not that I was brought up in the horse and buggy time, and definitely no Google. There wasn't any quality TV. But I was gifted art supplies, a sewing machine, an Etch a Sketch, and other creative toys. We had lots of wonderful times listening to music and dancing. Traditional Puerto Rican music was played every Saturday (and really, everyday) to wake us up and to stimulate us for the chores we were about to do and complete by the end of the day.

The positive influences in my early life are abundant. My savvy parents along with my immediate and extended family, were my most fervent positive influences. My mother was quick-witted and very aware of people and made sure to educate us about life and to be aware of the pitfalls, before they happened. My mother was educated without having the actual degrees.

She learned from her older siblings who were professionals. She ensured that we were fully entrenched in our Latino culture. My father was the consummate hard-working Puerto Rican father. Woke up at five am every day to go to work, back by six pm. He ingrained in us the example of a strong work ethic, was humble and instilled in us family values. My oldest sister, ten years my senior, Zayda, was a classic style girl; never trendy, studious, excellent work ethic, and articulate. My youngest sister, Betsy, was sweet, smart, strong, and a no-nonsense hard worker. My late brother was meticulous, funny, handsome, and focused. He was the prince of the house. He had his own room. The sisters in turn had a trundle bed and a pull-out twin ottoman. The room looked like a dormitory when all the beds were open and a living room when all were closed. I have tried to emulate traits from all of them. All are professionals. “*Dime con quien andas y te dire quien eres*” means, “Tell me who you hang around with, and I will tell you who you are.” In this case they were my family.

Outside of the immediate family and in the neighborhood, one of our in-laws, Don Carlos Abrew, organized family trips to places like to Niagara Falls, Amish Country, Hershey Pennsylvania, and other iconic sites. I will never forget the trips, as they opened another level of experiences outside of my neighborhood. My elementary school had the great fortune of being across the street from the beginning of Museum Mile on 104th street and 5th Avenue. Our numerous trips to the City of New York Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, The Natural History Museum and so many more, obviously left an indelible mark. Our home was also one block away from Central Park, 5th Avenue and Museum Mile, which I didn't make the connection until later, that maybe that had *something* to do with my interest in museums and culture. Downstairs of my building the city built an amphitheater. The programming brought to inner city families were some of the following top acts; Ed Sullivan, Mick Jagger, Miriam Colon

Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, Peaches and Herb, a popular singing duo, and so many more and beyond that, equipment for the children to play games. Being able to experience professional entertainers first-hand was priceless.

The Casita Maria, a neighborhood Community Center provided fine arts instruction, dance classes, vocational and cultural enrichment classes, and sponsorship for a Catholic Church camp. No SUGAR in our cereal for the entire two weeks. That was traumatic (laughs). At the end of the two-week camp session, I was able to eat cereal without sugar and knew all of the words to the Catholic services and prayers. Upon my return to the neighborhood, I tried out for a Flamenco Traveling Dance Company and was accepted. I was also taught the Mexican Hat Dance steps to perform a solo performance, although I was brought up dancing salsa, cha-cha-cha, and other popular dances.

I joined the Girl Scouts troupe where I was the only person of color and attended the Girl Scout Camp. We slept in tents and everything, it was lovely. The only incident that made me reflect on my differences instead of my similarities was when a camp friend from Indiana said, “Why is your hair different than mine?” I had never even thought of my hair as different than anybody because I liked my hair very much. I could wear it curly, straight, wavy, braided; basically, anyway I wanted to. So, I said, “I don’t know,” and continued to get involved in the activities. But I never forgot her comment. These experiences broadened my horizons and taught me to try new things, and that people had differences. I was brought up during the time, about the late 1960’s, when activism was starting to take the place of complacency.

LAURENTS: *The Brown Berets?*

The Young Lords, a group of mostly Puerto Rican youth activists, wanted socio-economic empowerment, cultural enlightenment, and equal rights changes in New York City, and also the

independence of Puerto Rico. They were the equivalent of the Black Panthers and the Brown Berets, the Chicano activist group, active in about 1967, in Los Angeles. In 1972, the Brown Berets seized Catalina Island to protest the United States illegally occupying Mexican/Indigenous land. Most of these groups modeled their organizations after the Black Panthers. Even at that young age, about twelve years old, I was interested in what they were saying and intrigued by their ideology.

NATHALIE: What do you know about what life was like in Puerto Rico?

Coming off the TWA (Trans World Airline) airplane in the mid 1960's, I was struck by the humidity as we walked down the staircase onto the tarmac toward the terminal. There was no moving walkway. The difference between then and now was that commuters dressed up to travel. You were considered privileged to be able to fly commercially. I had never seen the Caribbean as a child until I traveled with my parents for the first time to Puerto Rico. I loved the palm trees, the smell of the ocean, the beautiful small colorful homes and Old San Juan; the main city with a real fort; the El Morro Fort (Castillo San Felipe del Morro), built between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, where invasions were fought off. I imagined, the Taíno Indians, Spaniards and Africans battling to keep the strong hold of the island. One interesting phenomenon in Puerto Rico was that you could walk on one side of the street and get rained on, while the other side stayed dry. It was advisable to carry a small umbrella for those quick downpours.

At every stop on the way to my grandparents, the interaction with the rainbow of people was friendly and warm. The majority of the people spoke quickly and were able to speak English as well as Spanish with ease, as English was taught throughout the school system. The population of Puerto Ricans living in the United States was 892,513 in the 1960's.

My mother Zenia Santana Pesante, was the youngest in a family of thirteen children. Large families were the norm back then. They were poor but were still educated as much as they could. My maternal grandmother, Francesca Santana, was a homemaker. Her family came from Spain. They settled in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico on the west side of the island. My great-grandfather was also from Spain.

Julian Pesante, my maternal grandfather, was of African ancestry. His family roots were in Anasco, Puerto Rico. He became an engineer/architect who designed bridges and other structures in Puerto Rico as a young man. For his efforts, a street was named after him in Santurce, Puerto Rico. The street can still be found, albeit in a very old section of town. They eventually settled in Santurce, Puerto Rico, on the eastern coast of the island.

My father, Gualberto (Roberto) Arvelo, was the oldest son out of five siblings. I remember his mother, my paternal grandmother, Maria Robles Arvelo as a strong, independent woman. My grandmother's family was of Native American and African descent. She was a certified nurse in Santurce, Puerto Rico. My paternal grandfather, Angel Luis Arvelo, was a carpenter and handyman. His family settled in Jayuya, a mountainous region of Puerto Rico. He would be considered a hillbilly or *jibaro*. They lived a simple life in the mountains. My grandfather's family originated from the Canary Islands (with Italian roots), Spain, and Portugal. The family was financially comfortable when they moved to Santurce. They had a *criada*, a maid/housekeeper, and a nice small home in Santurce, Puerto Rico.

Like most Latinos, our family is the product of a mix of races. Puerto Rico was inhabited by the Taíno indigenous peoples when Christopher Columbus and other explorers of those days came upon the island while looking for India (thus the name Indians). Spaniards and Portuguese shipmates along with African slaves, some middle easterners, Lebanese and Asians were among

the first people who arrived to the island. Borinken was the name given to the island by the natives. The name Puerto Rico means Rich Port. The Spaniards named it rich port or Puerto Rico to signify the amount of gold and riches on the island. It was inhabited by the Taíno people. I consider myself Afro-Latina, due to the makeup of my family.

Some of the Taínos scattered to the mountains with the African slaves, Middle Easterners, and the Europeans; mainly from Spain and Portugal. There weren't women on those ships, so they found their comfort with Taíno women who made it to the mountains. Interracial marriages and cohabitating followed. The people who went up to the mountains, who are considered *los jíbaros*, and their new families carried on the traditions of their ancestors. This was done in an effort to survive the destruction caused by new diseases introduced to the island and abuse of the Taíno population through slavery and the new changes to their way of life. After some time, the Spaniards replaced the Taínos with Africans, Middle Easterners, Asians and other groups to help with the labor. The Indigenous population was virtually wiped out except for the ones who escaped and created enclaves in the dense forests of the island. Some of the African slaves settled in a city, now called Loiza Aldea. Puerto Rico was beginning to take on a personality of its own. The mixture of the peoples at that time, began to manifest itself into a new culture which positively affected the language, dress, rituals, religions, ceremonies, culinary dishes, belief systems and architecture on the island. The dominant culture at that time was from Spain and Portugal and is now thoroughly ingrained in the Puerto Rican culture.

The political climate was charged. Slavery was abolished on March twenty-second, 1873 while the island was still a colony of Spain. The Spanish American War resulted in the emancipation of Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898. The island (actually archipelago- a group of islands), then became a commonwealth of the United States in 1898, due to the Treaty of Paris.

Spain ceded Puerto Rico, as were the Philippines, Guam and Cuba to the United States, led by President McKinley. The Foraker Act and the Jones Act, in the 1900s helped to form a new government. In my opinion equity has still not been given to those islands.

LAURENTS: I wanted to ask more about Puerto Rico and how Puerto Ricans are politically active here in the United States. Puerto Rico is in this unique position where you are a U.S. territory and you get citizenship when you're born.

As I mentioned, after centuries of Spanish rule, Puerto Rico became a territory of the United States in 1898; not a state. In 1917, Congress passed the Jones-Shafroth Act, granting U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Ricans. This act also made Puerto Rican males eligible for military draft. Over 18,000 were drafted for World War I. A smaller island called Vieques became an important military base for the United States. Many Puerto Ricans came to the mainland, for economic opportunities. Further, my cousin, Luis Falu, was one soldier awarded a recognition as a member of the Borinqueneers, one of the most highly commended troops in World War I.

But could you clear up for those who aren't familiar with the citizenship, how does it go? Who can vote? Who can't vote? What's the representation?

The glitch is that because Puerto Rico residents do not live in a state, and the electors in the electoral college must come from a state, residents of Puerto Rico and other United States territories do not have voting representation in the U.S. Congress and are not entitled to electoral votes for president.

In 1948, Congress mandated that Puerto Ricans could elect their own governors. In 1952, we became a Commonwealth of the United States, with our own Constitution and other powers of self-government. It was mandated that Puerto Ricans on the island would have the right to elect non-voting representatives in Congress and vote in primaries, *but* not for the president.

Just to clarify for myself, if you're born on the island, you can't vote.

Correct. Only in the primaries for the president, and for the non-voting representative in Congress.

If you're born on the mainland, like New York, you can vote.

Yes. If you move from Puerto Rico, to the mainland, you can register to vote; including for the actual presidency.

This gets a little more complicated. Now, if a person from the island were to immigrate to the mainland, what is that process like? Is it going through a citizenship even though you are technically a citizen?

We are citizens, as per the Jones-Shafroth Act, therefore we migrate to the mainland. If you live in the United States, then it's different because it is a state, not a territory and has an elector; then you can vote. Now, because I was born in the United States, New York, considered a citizen due to that Jones-Shafroth Act, I can vote. I am a U.S. citizen. We do not need a green card, Visa, passport or any of those other forms of documentation. We are U.S. citizens from a United States territory.

Were your parents able to vote once they came to the mainland?

That's right. That's right.

Okay. That's interesting. So as soon as you hit the mainland, you can vote.

That's right. However, you have to register to vote, as in any state.

That's interesting.

We can come and go. English is taught in the schools as the second language in the schools. It is a compulsory subject from elementary to high school. Spanish is the main language of instruction. Most of my family members who lived on the island also graduated from college.

They have an educated force there as well. They have good colleges and universities. A few family members started school in Puerto Rico and completed their studies in the United States.

Thank you. I wanted to clear that up.

NATHALIE: You mentioned travelling to Puerto Rico. What it was like in Santurce?

Visiting Santurce as a child, I remember there were lots of mosquitos. They would come out mostly at night. Lots of them; so we had to sleep with a *mosquitero* (mosquito netting). I stayed in my grandparents' home that had two sections to it. There was the front house, a traditional small house with a porch, three bedrooms, tiled floors, and shutters, and the casita part, that had stairs that led to a bedroom and the 2nd floor *mirador* (balcony). A mango tree grew in the front yard. That tree is still producing mangos to this day, and the tiled scene on the porch of the ocean and a boat is still on the porch of the home. Time and the elements have not damaged these wonderful memories. The city was considered a working-class neighborhood. It was within walking distance of the beach and to the *Hipodromo*, the horse racetrack. Santurce is located on the northeast side of the island; ideally located close to San Juan.

How did your parents go from Puerto Rico to New York?

In 1942, my father came to the United States on a ship that docked at Ellis Island, where the majority of immigrants, arrived when entering the United States. An immediate result of that voyage was that his entire name was changed to make it easier to pronounce. He went from Gualberto to Roberto, and from Arbelo to Arvelo. He settled in New York City. My mother had also arrived by ship with her mother, because her father had died, and he was the primary breadwinner. My mother's siblings were already in the U.S. They came as they aged because in New York there were a lot of jobs. My mother's brother, my uncle Bill, introduced my mother to my father. They married and moved to 102nd street and Madison Ave.

My father became a merchant marine when he first arrived to New York. In the 1950's, he accepted a job as a glass bender. It became his profession. No, he was not a strong man, joke, joke—A glass bender is someone who uses humongous ovens to heat and mold large display size pieces of glass. He serviced Lincoln Center, Bergdorf Goodman, Macy's, and many other major locations. He became the foreman of the business and he and his employees would place the straight glasses into the molds and they would come out curved. He was the producer of the materials and had installers and drivers to deliver the finished products. I remember he use to bring home tables that were curved, made out of remnants. I recently saw one priced for over \$300 at a popular furniture store.

He ran the business. His boss had a lot of faith in my father, so he let him manage the business. It was my dad and maybe two assistants. The business, was located in a large warehouse on 22nd Street and 9th Ave. His boss was Jewish and lived in upstate New York. Had I known—I wish I could go back in time and learn more about his business. At the time we were young; we didn't know all of that. Although they had an accountant, my father handled the immediate finances, purchase orders, and organized deliveries. He was very organized. My older sister had the task of putting all the invoices in order according to the date, to help him out at home. Why didn't we know about the rest of the business? Because we were young, and it was not the type of business a child could easily be a part of. “*Los ninos hablan cuando las gallinas mean*”. (The literal translation was, “Children talk, when the roosters pee.”) Which is never. So, children did not speak unless spoken to for the most part. Respect. I did not realize, and I think that may be cultural, that Latino fathers didn't really talk a lot about what their jobs consisted of in those days.

My mother was an educator at our school. She worked as a paraprofessional and as a teacher assistant, she organized parent workshops. When she retired—she always told us that a position in a school district was the best job in the world to have, because when you have children, you can take time off with them when they were on vacations, you get to know their teachers, and keep track of what's going on educationally. That advice must have stuck in my mind because I became an educator and an administrator.

Were you the youngest? Eldest? How many siblings do you have?

I'm in the middle. I have a sister who is ten years older than me, and a brother who was seven years older than me, and then there is a big gap. I was almost like an older child, and then my younger sister was born two years later.

You mentioned in the Spanish Harlem area you interacted with other cultures. What other Latino cultures did you interact with?

Although we were introduced to all types of people when we stepped out the door, we really didn't have a lot of different friends visiting our apartment. We did have *fiestas* for our birthdays and graduations, and close family friend gatherings. In those days, the visitors were our extended family and a few friends from the neighborhood and building, and my parents' close friends. The majority of the visitors were Puerto Ricans. My mother cooked large *ollas* [pots] of food having four children and in-laws or uncles residing at the house. It was, and is, very common to have extra food in our homes, because you never knew when someone was stopping by to visit. Even though we had a telephone, as a rule, people didn't announce their visits unless they were visiting from another state or country.

I did interact with a lot of people when I went to school and cultural activities. The area was multi-cultural. My parents, but especially my mother, would take us to all kinds of activities. In

New York you can walk five blocks and there is a festival: A Greek Festival, an African Festival, an Italian Festival, this Festival, that Festival. That is the way it was and still is. We were able to enjoy and absorb the culture as normally as our own. Although I did not realize until I was an adult that these experiences were only the tip of the cultural iceberg. I learned later that there was so much more to culture than just food, music, and folklore dances. I learned that as a Multicultural Liaison for my schools in the CCSD.

There was an outdoor shopping area called the *Marqueta* in our neighborhood that provided economic opportunities to the residents of *El Barrio* and the city. It was a microcosm of the city.

Like a swap meet?

No, because they sold all new items, unlike a swap meet. Everything was new, but less expensive than the regular stores. They sold almost anything the community needed. The items looked just as good as the name brands but, there probably was a difference in quality.

An interesting fact about the *Marqueta* was that it was constructed under the train tracks between the tunnels on Park Avenue in Manhattan. On the surrounding blocks, there were traditional stores. Although I love fish, it smelled of raw fish in one section and the ground was damp. Never liked that part. The *Marketa* had a big influence on our culture and provided a sense of community. It was a meeting place to have *cafe*, savor typical food, meet friends and for economic growth if you were a vendor. We walked over fifteen blocks weekly to peruse one of our favorite shopping places.

You mentioned the food in Puerto Rico is a mix of all these different cultures. What kind of food did you grow up with in the home?

The foods we ate in our home in New York City were indicative of the foods our families ate in Puerto Rico. There was not a big difference between the mainland (New York) and the island

(Puerto Rico) cuisine. It was called *Comida Criolla*. It is the cuisine created by the Europeans colonists, mainly Spaniards, using ingredients from traditional recipes. Some of the foods that my mother and family prepared were typical: *Arroz con gandules* (rice & pigeon peas), *pernil asado* (roasted pork), *arroz blanco* (white rice), *vianda con bacalao* (root vegetable salad with cod fish), *habicheulas guisadas* (stewed beans), *pollo guisado* (stewed chicken), *pasteles* (Puerto Rican meat tamales), *alcapurrias*, *mofongo*, *aguacate*, fish, *bacalaítos*, *maduros & tostones* (green and ripe plantains). We also ate plenty of fruit and specialty desserts, such as mangos, *piña* (pineapples), *arroz con dulce*, *flan* and of course coffee with hot milk, plenty of sugar and soda crackers with plenty of butter, and *Cerveza Negra*, a non- alcoholic malt drink, among other dishes.

The mix of the ingredients reflect the roots of the island's development. From the native Indians, the Taínos and Arawaks, some of the major foods incorporated into the mealtimes were yuca, peppers, corn, casava, and chilies. The Europeans (Spaniards) introduced olives, garlic, cilantro, oil, cumin, plantains, *gandules* [pigeon peas], and cod fish. Many of those ingredients served as the base for the seasoning for the foods we eat presently, called Sofrito when mixed into a puree. Some of the foods and spices brought from Africa were plantains, rice, legumes and the art of frying. Olive oil was used, then lard and finally corn oil, as the costs fluctuated. Cuchifritos, a sample of different vegetables and fried meats was a regular staple in our family. Finally, Corsos, Arabs, Italians, and the Chinese also left part of their culinary artistry in Puerto Rico. Arabs for example, provided coffee, coconuts, tamarind, yams, sesame seed and banana fruit.

As a young girl, I was slightly, and temporarily, traumatized when my uncle Neco came over and brought a live hen, a *gallina*, to the house. I was in the living room and the kitchen was

close by. At first you heard the “cluck, cluck, cluck”, and then all the sudden you hear “augh.” I knew he had twisted the *gallina*’s neck; it was slaughtered and I was traumatized. Later on, we cooked him for dinner.

BARBARA: *Oh, when they twist the neck.*

Yes. Since we had assimilated to the American culture, we also ate American food. My mother was a fantastic cook. I must have been studying too hard because I didn't pick up any cooking skills. *Bacalaitos* (Cod Fish Fritters), and that's it. But my sisters cook very well. Anyway, that was more or less, what we used to eat besides the occasional White Castle Hamburgers, pizza, and a few more fast-food items. Fast food was too expensive for a typical family in those times. There were not a lot of choices. Families cooked and ate at home. Ours did.

How were holidays celebrated with your family in New York? How do you implement the Latino culture with them?

In my house on New Year's Eve, we ate one grape for each month for prosperity and threw a glass of water out of the door or window to rid your home of negative energies that had accumulated. The tradition originated in Spain.

I'll share a funny and sad story. My mom was getting dementia and we were not aware of it. I went to visit her about twelve years ago for New Year's Eve. I said to my mother, “Ok, Mami, you get the water and I'll get the grapes.” We were not outside. I was in public housing on the ninth floor. When it hit twelve o'clock, and the ball dropped, we ate the grapes and then I noticed that she had filled about ten glasses of water. Ten glasses! So, I said to her in a high-pitched voice, "Mami, how much evil do we have in this house that we have to throw out all this water?!" We both laughed out loud. That was a funny memory that I remember.

We also celebrated Three Kings Day, with gifts under the bed. *Día de Descubrimiento*, that's recent. Puerto Rican Discovery Day used to focus on Christopher Columbus Day but now we honor the native people of Puerto Rico, the Taínos, and we recognize Columbus as an explorer who arrived to the island. Others were Easter, Christmas, *Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve), *Parrandas* (caroling traditional songs), and *Noche de San Juan Bautista* among many others. On *Noche de San Juan*, we walk to the beach on June twenty-fourth and walk in backwards, cleansing yourself in the waves. They still do it in Puerto Rico.

Do you know why it was on that day specifically?

It is Saint John the Baptist's birthday. That's a big one. I'm trying to go by month. Mother's Day is a huge holiday for the mothers.

We do not celebrate *Día de los Muertos* in Puerto Rico. However, almost every home has an altar with their significant saints, a statue of Jesus Christ and of the Virgin Mary. We had one. There are many other smaller festivals throughout the island that were not celebrated in my home when I was growing up.

During Lent throughout the island, a festival is held in Loiza Aldea and in Ponce. People wear horned-masks called *vejigantes*. They would walk down the streets and the community would follow them. They play *panderetas*, small hand drums, and perform traditional dances, the *Bomba* and *Plena*.

What was school like for you from elementary school and middle school?

School was typical for a big urban city. The elementary school was located two blocks away from my apartment building. There was a crossing guard nevertheless, that became a family friend.

Do I remember the teachers' names? Yes, a few. Notable ones were my second and fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Barbara Wilson, and my fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Steele. Ms. Wilson was responsible for ensuring that I left elementary school with legible writing. LOL. You can thank her for my not having a doctor's signature. My fifth-grade teacher was originally Ms. Reilly, until she was the victim of an assault at the school during a burglary. That resulted in the outside doors of the school being locked. Understandably, the trauma caused her to resign. Ms. Judi Kandel then replaced her. My fifth-grade teacher would have a recurring role in my life; Ms. Kandel then, Ms. Judi Steele now. I remember her taking a few children to visit Greenwich Village, the equivalent of the First Fridays' area in Las Vegas. I was one of the students. She was accessible, caring and a great teacher.

Up to this point, I did not feel that my education was poor or inadequate. That could have been because I did not know better, and my family always made sure that I was supported in my education. My mother worked at the school, so I was *very* focused.

BARBARA: *She has interviewed for the Southern Nevada Jewish project, yes.*

Yes. Little did I know that she would have a life-long influence on me. I ran into Ms. Steele again as an adult, in Las Vegas, when I was working as a dental technician. At that time, she was the Director of the Special Education division of the Clark County School District.

Around 1982, since I had not finished paying my student loan, I was not allowed to get my degree, therefore unable to get a job at the CCSD. She came into the office and I recognized her, after twenty years. Ms. Steele wrote a letter to the loan officials asking them to lower my payments and allow the degree to be released. Her efforts paid off, as shortly thereafter, I received my degree and began working at the CCSD. Ms. Steele is now and has been for many years, the director of the Public Education Foundation (PEF) here in Las Vegas. The foundation

is one of the most influential public educational advocate organizations in Las Vegas, ensuring equitable education for public schools in Nevada. That was a commercial. She instilled in her students the ability to think outside of the box. A very important part of my life was when she felt I was ready, she had radar on me like that; she asked me to join the PEF in the Family Learning Program and then as Director of the Grant Program. That was when I felt secure enough to leave the museum in the hands of employees for a couple of years in 2015. Impactful! When I graduated from sixth grade and was going to seventh grade, a segment of the school was assigned to a school called Wagner Junior High School, due to overcrowding at the main campus. They had an annex on 51st Street and the main school was on 76th Street. This was the first year that they were sending so many Latinos and Blacks to Wagner. It was in a more affluent area of New York City. This school was somber looking, maybe about a five-story tall building with small windows. The education was a traditional system. I remember being a bit more challenged. Ms. Meyers was my main teacher for seventh grade, and she used me as her assistant, sometimes asking me to input grades into the grade book. I was surprised and a bit flattered that she would think me capable of doing this correctly. I believe it was the handwriting which got me that “job.” I remember completing the task diligently. I guess I followed directions well. But as I think to myself, where was I supposed to be, in what class? Hmmm?

Another weird part that has stayed with me throughout the years, was the appearance of the recess area. It was almost like a pen; it had long high walls. Even then, although I had never been to prison, I thought it may have been a prison in the past or maybe not. I remember that distinctly, looking around and thinking, “This is something.” It was very dark in terms of the whole atmosphere of the building and that bothered me.

But when I went to eighth grade at the actual Wagner Junior High School, it was better. There were more activities for the students and the population was more diverse and we were all working together very well. If there was preferential treatment occurring, I wasn't aware of it. There was a big school strike in New York City. It seemed like forever in a young person's mind; it seemed like a long time, but it might have been maybe two weeks. I was wrong. The strike lasted 36 days.

BARBARA: *What year would that have been?*

In 1968. The strike was actually a political strike against the idea of community control. 50,000 New York City teachers went on strike and more than a million students, for the most part, stayed out of the classrooms. Except for my siblings and I that is—LOL.

What motivated that strike?

I would imagine the same thing that motivates most strikes is money and conditions and things like that. At the time I was not aware of what motivated it, but I know that my parents said, "You still have to go to school." They valued education. They would say things like, "Even if there are two teachers and four students, you still have to go." So, we went, and there was minimal teaching going on. When school resumed, I became a cheerleader and became active in other clubs. I was a typical teenager.

When I graduated, I went to the same school my older sister attended when she was in high school, Julia Richman High School. At the time she attended, it was an all-girl school. By the time I attended, it had been converted to a co-ed facility. The school population was very diverse. There were many ethnicities represented. It was exciting.

I should mention that during my second year in high school, my school had metal detectors installed on the doors and guards, to check students when they arrived and left the

premises. That was only for one year. Apparently, there were students bringing weapons to the school, which I knew nothing about. They were not my friends. Disclaimer.

Initially the classes were not challenging for me. A few of the teachers appeared to be there just for the paycheck, as they say. The students noticed and that caused friction in the classroom and discipline problems. My literature teacher noticed that I was just whizzing through the class. He asked me if I would like to be in an accelerated college-bound program. I told my parents and they agreed. It was a great opportunity.

I didn't study a lot at that point, but I did enjoy school and I did enjoy learning. School was easy for me—except for math. I did not like it, because I didn't understand it. I signed up for a tutor, then I received high grades in geometry and algebra. It just took individualized instruction to get me up to par.

I always knew that it was important to be in school, but a few of the teachers did not always treat the Latino and Black students equally. The expectations were lower.

Did you see that kind of interaction at Wagner, too?

No, I was not aware of those attitudes at the time.

With the teachers and the students, I mean.

Overall no. I was only focused on my teachers and only if they made an impression. There were teachers who had issues with some of the students. The situation was better in high school because I had the opportunity to be in that college-bound program. I got more out of it. My biology teacher, Mr. Santiago, was one of the most serious teachers I had. He wrote an objective on the board daily, used “best practices”, still in use today, and showed his professionalism. He was the only Latino teacher I had had in all the school years. The counselor made sure that the students filled out all the applications for the state universities and colleges.

Had your older siblings been encouraged to move on in education?

It's the darnedest thing, in my house, we really didn't talk about it that much, maybe because my family, immediate and extended, were already established in their careers. But I don't remember going, "Oh, I've got to get to college." When the opportunity presented itself through counselors or invitations to visit colleges and fill out paperwork, for academic programs that would give us an edge, my family members would be there to help if we needed the help. It was expected.

LAURENTS: *They assumed you were going to move on?*

Yes. There were no high school dropouts in the family history that I knew of. I graduated in 1972.

Where did you apply?

I applied to all the state colleges and to Loyola College because at the time, criminal justice appealed to me, but I also really wanted to become a teacher. I had choices. I also enjoyed drawing. I got accepted to New Paltz State University and to Lehman College in the Bronx. I wanted to study out of the neighborhood. My friends in my building said that I was one of the first people they knew that went out of the neighborhood to college. That was nice to hear. I didn't know that until later on as an adult.

LAURENTS: *When you went out of the neighborhood, does that mean you went and lived near the campus?*

Yes, I lived in upstate New York in the dormitories for the entire four years; except for the times I studied overseas. It was quite an experience.

Where did you end up going?

The State University of New York at New Paltz.

Did you enroll in education right away?

As a child, I would pull out the wooden drawers from my dresser and use chalk to write lessons on the back of them for my friends and cousins. I would pretend I was a teacher. But by the time it was time to attend college, I wasn't sure what I wanted my major to be. I wanted to major in art, but then I thought, "Am I really that great in art?" My portfolio was stolen from my high school counselors' office, so I didn't have any artwork to show at the school. I also loved dancing. But I was not trained in classical dance or ballet. In my extended family we had many professionals as role models. There were educators, engineers, soldiers, television personalities, social workers, community activists, lawyers and more.

I decided to get my degree in secondary education with a minor in Spanish. I wanted to master Spanish grammar, not get a Master's in Spanish grammar. Even though a lot of people speak Spanish, and just like in English; they do not know the structure of the language. I think that was my case; there was not a professional teaching of Spanish grammar and the literature in my background. I wanted to learn that.

NATHALIE: When did you graduate?

I graduated in 1976.

Upon graduating did you jump right into the education field?

Well, a couple of years before I graduated, an opportunity presented itself when I was walking past the Overseas Studies Programs office at New Paltz State University. A couple of my friends had traveled to Puerto Rico for a semester, so I knew about the program. They had a large map on the wall, and I gravitated toward Colombia, South America and Spain. I decided to inquire more about Spain. The criteria included maintaining a three-point grade average, and you had to commit to at least one semester to the program. The courses and living expenses were paid for by the program. The only part that I was responsible for was air travel and personal expenses.

Surprisingly, my parents covered the \$800 plus cost I needed for the airfare. I didn't know if my parents could afford it and I remember asking shyly. They didn't hesitate. They said, "Yes, of course." I exclaimed, "Really?!" I was so excited.

I was in Spain for three months, a summer semester. That study abroad trip was one of the most exciting and incredible experiences of my life. The organizers created a very well-thought out, educational experience. University study, city trips and tours included Ovied (studied there), Gijon, Santander, Sevilla (studied there), Bilbao, Vallalodid, Cordoba, Merida, Madrid (studied there), Toledo, Jerez, Salamanca, Cadiz, Malaga, Sebastian, Leon and Costa del Sol (vacationed there). Morocco was a ferry trip away from Costa del Sol, which I did not take and always longed to go to, but as an adult, I spent a surreal 13 days there. Dreams do come true. In Oviedo, we stayed in a dormitory for about a month, where maids would clean our rooms daily. I told them, "You don't have to clean my room." The housekeepers were very grateful. There was a Jewish student, who became a good friend of mine. We decided that we should do something for the maids. We cooked for them—not only she and I, but all the students who were in the group. There were about 25 students from four New York State Universities represented. We prepared what we considered a typical American meal, meatloaf, mashed potatoes, peas, corn and cornbread. We cooked and served them. It felt so good to serve them. They were humbled and overwhelmed with gratitude. This was my first step toward taking the lead in a project. Upon my return to New Paltz, I was treated differently by the administrators at the Overseas Study program office. I had received a very nice evaluation. Then after that, I traveled to Puerto Rico and I studied at the Institute of Culture in San Juan.

It was all through the university?

Yes. Many schools have a Study Abroad Program. They are titled differently and may have different criteria, but at that time most of the universities that I knew of had it. You could travel.

I didn't know you could travel to multiple different places, too.

Yes. Look into it. Some schools require that you do not travel the last semester of study. It was the experience of a lifetime.

What was it like studying in Puerto Rico since those were your roots?

Good question! I studied at The Institute of Culture for a semester under the leadership of Ricardo E. Alegria, the founder and renowned academic of the institution. He along with other professors created a curriculum which covered main areas of study. The Institute parlayed its mission as a cultural institution into a world class museum; and various other departments covering areas such as Investigations of Indigenous roots, historical documents, architecture, the P.R. revolutions, political systems, literature, fine arts, to name a few. It was an honor to learn from these seasoned instructors and then impart that information as a student and later as an educator.

I loved the fact that I was engulfed by my culture. My peers and I would go to different places, like the beautiful beach in Luquillo, the seaside food kiosks, local attractions and to purchase *artesanía*, the local arts and crafts. The experience was a bit different than in Spain, the travel was less structured. Puerto Rico is a smaller country which lent itself to more independent living and exploration.

Since in our home we were entrenched into our Puerto Rican culture, it was invigorating to be totally immersed in the actual island atmosphere, surrounded by beautiful blue-green water and experiencing the sights and sounds of my culture. Two of my favorite memories were of the mountainous areas. I visited El Yunque, the largest rain forest in North America and The

Arecibo Observatory, a radio telescope built in the 1960's, to attempt to view, communicate, and listen to asteroids and various life forms. They were monitored by science foundations and Cornell University. The forest was dense, the soil was rich and fertile, and the foliage was lush and beautiful. Another highlight was visiting the *Museo de Las Americas*. It was housed in an old colonial building with a large open plaza area in the middle. The exhibits were varied. The building reminds me of the East Las Vegas Community Center but with two stories and more rooms.

Finally, it was wonderful to be around family, traveling to their homes, being cared for, and educated about the nuances of the island. And I have to admit, that the food had a richer taste, because most of the ingredients and seafood were fresh.

What was one of the biggest takeaways you had from that experience, from Spain, from Puerto Rico, being away from family and everything?

One of the biggest takeaways was being able to read, write, and speak Spanish at a level which I did not think I could. As a young adult and while in college, I started speaking more English because I became assimilated. But, when I went to Spain, I was happily surprised that I knew Spanish at a high enough level to be a translator for the other students. I always knew that I could read Spanish, but when I had to read the literature and poetry books, and interpret poetry, I felt empowered when I was able to, while still having the full understanding. The textbooks from Spain were initially a challenge. I began increasing my vocabulary and writing and answering questions. Having discourse with different students and individuals from Spain further developed my communication skills. It was wonderful just knowing that I was connected in that way. In Puerto Rico, my biggest take-a-way was experiencing my roots within an enhanced authenticity. Waking up daily to the sound of the rooster's alarm clock! Seeing similarities in the

physical attributes of people in Spain and Puerto Rico to my family members was also an eye opener. I did get homesick but only a little bit. I believe that experience helped me to accept the larger Hispanic community's cultures, when I started the *Casa de la Cultura Latina* through the Hispanic Museum of Nevada and to educate the children in the Institute of Culture Youth Art Camp.

What year did you graduate?

1976 officially, but until I paid my loan, 1977.

After graduating, what happened after that?

I worked for the criminal justice agency at the Queens County Court, in Queens, New York, as a Bilingual Interviewer for the Release on their own Recognizance program for felony and misdemeanor offenders. A fellow classmate was studying to become a lawyer and alerted me to this job. It was my first job, two months after I graduated. I accepted this job before I moved to Las Vegas.

In the 1970's there were close to 14 million Latinos in the U.S. The jail population was just beginning to reflect the growing population of Latinos and the record growth of Black incarceration.

It was an interesting job. I had to call offenders about impending warrants, go into cell areas with the alleged criminals, and verify their housing and employment statuses. It was a very, uncomfortable feeling, not being with the inmates, but being in or near the cells. I ran across an Italian young man, Tony, who I had attended junior high school and attended a camp with. I asked what he was there for. He was a well-mannered, smart boy when I knew him, so, I was surprised when he confessed, "I was hungry, and so I stole steaks from the store." I could not

contain myself. I was in tears. I tried to mentor him for a little while—but I got married and we lost contact. Then I relocated to Las Vegas.

One of my first jobs when I moved to Las Vegas was as a—wait for it, a Bilingual Interviewer for the Release on your Recognizance program in the Nevada detention system. I was reading the Review Journal about a new program, like the one in New York. I called the person in charge and they hired me, sight unseen because I had that experience from New York, and it was a new program here in Nevada. Life is so interesting!

Before that, I got married in New York. My husband was in the Air Force in Las Vegas. We had a big wedding in New York City and then he brought me to Las Vegas as the honeymoon “forever place”. He went on to become the owner, Editor and Publisher of the only African American newspaper in Nevada, The Sentinel Voice Newspaper and currently is the producer for 88.1 Black Power Talk Action Radio Show as its Producer.

BARBARA: *You came here on a honeymoon, not because it was an air force move.*

No, I came to Las Vegas because my husband had enlisted in the Air Force. He was stationed here. I used to say, “Oh, it's my honeymoon!”, because who wouldn't think that this is like a honeymoon? But we did finally go on a real honeymoon years later to Mexico and settled here.

LAURENTS: *He was stationed here at Nellis?*

Yes, at Nellis Air Force Base. Then we had three wonderful sons.

NATHALIE: **What are their names?**

Joseph, Marcello, and Isaac, two college graduates and one Army veteran of two deployments to Iraq.

BARBARA: *What year was it that you arrived in Vegas?*

I arrived in 1978.

NATHALIE: What was Vegas like then?

Let me tell you, it was the first time I had ever seen tumbleweed besides the ones I saw in cowboy movies. It was dusty. I did not know anyone when I arrived besides my husband and I was not one to venture out. Also, when I arrived it was easily 115 degrees. I had decided at that point, that I was only going out between six am and eight pm. I felt like a vampire. I was accustomed to four distinct seasons, not ultra-heat. We settled into housing intended mostly for Nellis Air Force Base servicemen and their families.

The boundaries of Las Vegas as far as I can remember, were mostly Nellis Boulevard on the east, Cheyenne Avenue on the north, Rainbow Boulevard on the west and Flamingo Road on the south. Lake Mead Boulevard was the one street that took you further to the lake. The golf course on Flamingo Road was the landmark for me and all the other areas just had desert beyond the boundaries. In 1978, the population in Clark County was 412, 900 with an estimated growth rate of 5.99%. Hispanics made up less than 7% of the state's residents.

In about 1980, I was approached about becoming a dental assistant. No experience needed. They would train. Since I did not have a teaching job at the time, I consented and was hired. I ran to my local dentist, Dr. Owen Justice, and he gave me a mini training. I really liked the job and learned a lot.

Then as good luck would have it, while working on files, I looked up and thought I recognized the lady at the reception area. The woman thought she taught me in Las Vegas, but it turned out that she was my fifth-grade teacher, formally Ms. Kandel, now Ms. Steele. We both started yelling! I was in her fifth-grade class in New York, she had just graduated from college and in her first teaching experience in the inner-city elementary school!

She asked if this was my profession because we had not spoken for many years. I told her my situation. “I’m a teacher. I went to school for teaching and paying off my student loan and with two children is difficult.” Judi wrote a letter asking if they could lower my payments. It’s good to know somebody, right? And, to be prepared. She helped me. The most incredible thing about this encounter was that she had saved a letter I wrote her in fifth grade and handed it to me during a dinner. During my time in Vegas, we have been in communication, always leading to a positive change in my life. I felt so honored and it was so serendipitous that I would meet up again with my teacher.

BARBARA: *It is a small world, yes.*

Yes, it is a small world.

NATHALIE: **Which religion did you practice with your family?**

I was baptized at Saint Cecilia Catholic Church but brought up Presbyterian at Good Neighbor Presbyterian Church. Both churches were across the street from each other. Every Sunday we would attend services.

We participated in a summer camp that the church organized for many years. It was attended by all denominations. It was more like what they call now, a non-denominational church. That is really what it was. The camp played a major part in our lives. Camp Green Acres was located in upstate New York. It was an integral part of my spiritual life and personal growth. Morning prayers, fellowship, team building and more made the lessons life-long experiences. As the Director of the Hispanic Museum of Nevada, members involved will attest to the fact that I insisted on praying before we moved into our locations to bless the spaces and our planned endeavors. It was something that we were taught, as a child, to do whenever you moved into a new home or business.

It was the first level of a yearly, multi-level camp experience. First, we attended the Family Camp in Dover Plains, New York, then the Teen Camp in New Hampshire and Maine, then you became a Counselor-in-Training and finally a Camp Counselor or some other leader in the camp. I went through the levels to become the Family Arts and Crafts Director while in college. I micro followed this model when we operated the Institute of Culture Youth Art Camp at the Museum. It was an incredible camp where the families stayed in log cabins with their children. The families would have all meals together. They would ring a bell and the family members would gather near the dining area. After dinner, everyone would play games such as volleyball or would go to the lake for s'mores. It was an effective attempt to expose inner-city families to life in nature. In the mornings and at lunchtime (after a nap), the children would go across the road for arts and crafts, singing, and archery with the other children, while the parents stayed on one side and engaged with the other adults. This experience taught me how to be a team player and helped build my spiritual and Christian foundation.

Being a city girl, I learned that I absolutely love the smell of fresh grass and dew in the morning and being among the trees and nature. I didn't want to go on a hike one day and a senior camp volunteer asked me, "Would you like to learn how to crochet?" I said, "Okay." I didn't know anything about crocheting, but I actually learned how to crochet a little bit. I just didn't want to go on the ten-mile hike. I like it now, but at the time I wasn't really into hiking. Anyway, that was that. Then I became a teacher.

What grade did you teach?

After I graduated from college, it was explained to me that I was not going to find a job as a secondary Spanish teacher in CCSD because there weren't many Spanish teachers nor a need for them. Latinos were sparse in the schools, so I would have to wait until there were changes. After

recertifying in elementary education, as advised by the late Uly Ramsey, I substituted for a few months, then I was offered a first-grade position in 1986.

I was hired at George Harris Elementary School. It was an excellent elementary school in Las Vegas at that time. The position was just what I needed as the staff was experienced and had high standards. I absolutely loved it. The children were so cute, so loving, like sponges they picked up everything. And as my mother had advised so long before, my children were there with me. At George Harris, they modeled different methodologies called Best Practices, and I felt like I had come full circle from the days I drew on the bottom of the dresser drawers and taught my friends. It was a new beginning, and I thought I was effective.

How long did you stay at Harris?

I stayed at Harris Elementary School for five years. I met outstanding teachers and lifelong friends there. Dr. Robert Wondrash was my first principal at George Harris. His style and expectations were just what I needed at the time as a first-year teacher; be independent.

Then my family moved to a newer part of town, and I started teaching at Antonello Elementary School. I stayed there for another five years. It seemed like that was my transitional time to stay at schools. Halle Hewetson became my third elementary school.

Did you recertify and get your master's here at UNLV?

Yes, I received my M.S. in Bilingual Education/Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL), from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. I also took classes at Nova University toward a certificate in Educational Leadership. The experience was very useful because the majority of the instructors were administrators who worked for the Clark County School District, so we learned first-hand about their system and processes of administration.

When I graduated with my master's and received a certificate in Educational Leadership, I had no intention of leaving my job at Halle Hewetson Elementary School because I was happy there. It was the first time the majority of the children I was teaching were Hispanics.

About two weeks after earning my Masters, I happened to go into the teachers' lounge. There was a job announcement for a position as an English Language Learner Facilitator, (ELL Facilitator). I was going down the criteria saying, *check; have that; have that*. And at the end, they required a Masters in my field. I was curious and called. I asked if they had any openings, not really wanting to leave. They said, "Oh, yes, we have about three or four openings. Would you like to go for interviews?" And my "mouth" said, "Okay."

That same day, after school, I got hired at two of the schools. I accepted the position for a multi-school assignment, I stayed there for several years. I never made it to the third interview. Years later, I became a Learning Strategist and shortly thereafter, an Assistant Principal, at Robert Lunt E.S., I felt right at home. I loved working with the Latino population, excited to be helping to inform and educate in the hopes that I was making a positive impact; perhaps not to be seen in the immediate timeframe. The school was close to the El Mundo Newspaper plaza. During my twenty-three years in the CCSD, I was part of many committees as a Member, Chair or Co-Chair. Often at the schools, I was the only Spanish-speaking employee. I would have to translate for parents in the main office or during parent conferences. As more Latinos moved to Nevada, the district hired more Spanish speaking employees.

Going back to when you came here, what was the Latino community like? Were you involved with the Latino community?

The Latino community was very sparse in 1978 through the 80's, but there were some people who were making an impact. For the most part, I didn't know them personally or had limited

contact with them because my focus was my family. In the early 1980's and beyond, Phil and Margo Torea were very active in the community. She was a flamenco dancer, and he produced a television program. Irma Wayans who now runs the Winchester Community Center started the Dia de los Muertos Celebration at the center and was becoming a cultural force, Eddie Escobedo Sr. started the only Spanish newspaper and the Mexican Patriotic Committee. Ixela Gutierrez founded the Mexico Vivo Dance Company. The group was starting out, like the museum. Sandy Colon-Pelton was a socialite and led many philanthropic efforts. Mary Matos started the first Puerto Rican social group in our community. Monica Ortiz, a Puerto Rican singer created a bilingual magazine called *Imágenes*, which would feature diverse Latino leaders in several fields. District Court Judge Mendoza was a force in our community, with too many highlights to mention. Tom Rodriguez, a writer and academic, wrote books about the history of Latinos in Nevada. Otto Merida and others started the first Latin Chamber of Commerce. Eva Garcia, was a respected lawyer, Tony Alamo was well known in the business/casino sector and Dr. Arturo Cambeiro and his brother, were making gains in the medical and architectural landscape of Las Vegas.

In the entertainment world on the strip, the Argentine Gaucho group was very popular. Jai Alai, a court game was a major draw in the 1970's, played by the Basque at the Bally's Hotel and Casino. Olga Breenki, a violinist, had a great following, as did the brothers Castro, and various lounge shows. Locally, John Pacheco an animated, outgoing person, of Mexican origin, was making himself known for his artistic talent. Those were the times, when you would get dressed up to go to a show and there would be live music. Those requirements changed when the live music was cut from the shows, and people's attire requirements began to get relaxed.

St. Christopher and St. Ann's Catholic Churches and schools had large Hispanic populations who would attend Mexican celebrations, in particular the celebration of *Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe* on December twelfth. These are the people and activities that stand out to me during my early years in Las Vegas.

That was here in Las Vegas?

Yes, again, I wasn't aware of all of the going-ons because I was busy raising my children, was new to the community, and getting established in my career. I know there were more mariachi shows, music, and traditions, like Charros events organized by Elias Samorano, and possibly other cultural celebrations, but those were going on sparsely around the community, and I wasn't involved because I didn't know, first of all, and secondly as a Puerto Rican, I wasn't really familiar with those cultural aspects which highlighted the cultures of the West Coast versus the East Coast.

My children, the memories of my parents love of their culture, my early life experiences, and the omission of my own culture in Las Vegas, propelled me toward starting the Hispanic Museum of Nevada. When I started working at St. Christopher's Catholic School in about 1984, which was my first school, I saw a display cabinet with a broken glass and I asked the principal, Mr. Roy Manabusan, I said, "Do you think I could get that glass fixed and put some things about Spanish culture in there? I have some things at home." He goes, "Yes, certainly. We can get it fixed." I went to the Best Glass Company and asked them to donate the glass and the labor. They did, and I started putting Latino artifacts in it. That was the first action I took toward the establishment of the museum. I didn't consciously know I was creating a museum, but I was creating the display because my sons started attending the school and I wanted them to see

something of their Latino culture. I had a statue of a flamenco dancer, a Taíno *cemí*, a pilon and mortar, a Spanish fan, and an old-fashioned coffee pot, to name a few.

LAURENTS: *Cemí*?

A Taíno *cemí* or *zemi* is a representation of a deity or ancestral spirit. A *cemí* comes from the indigenous people of Puerto Rico. They were also found near sites of the South American indigenous cultures. It was a stone replica which I purchased during my studies in Puerto Rico.

NATHALIE: You had those items.

Yes. I also bought a piece of *Lladró*, ceramic from Spain. The Lladró family started making porcelain figurines that became collectibles and valuable.

That was your first exhibit.

That was my first display, yes. I consider St. Christopher Catholic School our first location of the Hispanic Museum of Nevada in 1985.

How did you go from education to museums?

I was doing both simultaneously, teaching and the museum. I approached Dr. Avi Almeda, Director of the Nevada Association of Latin Americans (NALA) while I was still at St. Christopher's. I was hired at the Clark County School District during that time, so I needed to move the exhibit, which had started to grow, to another site. Dr. Almeda agreed to move the two display cabinets to NALA on 13th Street.

Then we held a fundraiser at the UNLV Judy Bayley Theatre. I called up acts on the Strip. It was easy to get through directly to the groups at that time. For the show we used, if memory serves me right, a comedian, a contemporary dancer (with a smoke machine), the Argentine tango group, Boleadores, and a local youth group. I actually walked and drove around, putting flyers on people's cars. I knew nothing about marketing, especially targeted marketing.

The theatre was full and we raised money. I purchased four more display cabinets from that fundraiser, and we moved three of them across the street when the Latin Chamber of Commerce purchased the Arturo Cambeiro Senior Center.

When Selena, the singer, died, I created an homage to her and people were thanking me. I was thinking, why are they thanking me? We are all Latinos. I felt her loss, too. She was a great singer. That really stuck with me; how we were separated by countries and the subcultures. NALA, located the across the street from the Latin Chamber of Commerce, was our second location.

About that time the late Councilman Ken Bass, informed us that the City was building the Rafael Rivera Community Center, and mentioned the possibility of the museum having space there. That was when it was being conceptualized. But then he was no longer in the position and Councilman Gary Reese became the new councilman. The councilman offered the use of the entry hallway for displays. He supported us by giving us access at the council level. We thought it was a great opportunity because we would have more exposure to the Latino community, to the children, and to other demographics. We moved yet again, more space, in a more visible location, among the Latino community. It was huge with potential!

In the center, we were able to use wall space for artwork as well as to display the artifacts in the cabinets. They offered us storage space, and the use of the multipurpose room. We also began involving local artists. Elias Samorano was the director at that time. He was welcoming and helped us in many ways with the nuances of the Mexican culture.

I began thinking about what items I could add that would further reflect the diversity of Latino cultures and about getting support through the establishment of a board. In 1991, the Hispanic Museum of Nevada Founding Board of Trustees was formed. The founding members

were: Ophelia Gomez, Vice President and Treasurer, my longest standing board member, a community activist, and realtor; Ron Esparza, Curator, an exceptional artist and graphic artist; Arturo Ochoa, Board Member, a life-long educator; Bill Marion, Board Member, Director of the Humanities Committee; Jack Greene, Board Member, a local businessman; Beatriz Alvarez Rueda, an educator originally from Colombia; and Vija Hamilton, Board Member, a talented art teacher. The board would change with the times and our needs over the course of the museum's lifetime.

The Rafael Rivera Community Center located on Stewart Avenue, was our third location. We officially became a 501 (c3) non-profit organization, established the Board, wrote Articles of Incorporation, By-Laws, and so much more in 1991. In the 1990's Nevada, especially Clark County saw the largest increase of Hispanics in the nation. The Hispanic Museum had a market.

Around what time was all this when you were setting up the cabinets?

We were setting up cabinets throughout the museum's lifetime, but the Rafael Rivera Center was built in the early 1990's. Several years later, the city decided to build the East Las Vegas Community Center on the corner of Eastern and Stewart Avenues, and they offered us a gallery. We were very excited because the building was magnificent. It had a courtyard, a large multipurpose room, an arts and crafts room, and various other areas. We leased the small gallery. It was another space, and we were so grateful. The option to use almost all the spaces within the building made the agreement even more enticing.

We named the gallery, *El Rinconcito de Arte*. For the opening of the East Las Vegas Community Center and the gallery, we brought in a group of musicians from Puerto Rico that played, as their main instrument, the *Cuatro*, which is the equivalent of the Spanish guitar with just four strings, thus, the *Cuatro*. Board members Edwin and Maria Aponte, along with the

other board members, played an important role in making those connections and seeing this event through. It was well received and marked the beginning of another level of growth. *Lo que está para ti, nadie te lo quita* [What is meant to be for you, won't be taken by anyone else].

A few weeks after we moved into the East Las Vegas Center, Rob McCoy, who is currently the Director of the Neon Museum, and was the Director of Community Relations at Sprint at that time called me. Their main office was located across the street from the Springs Preserve. Mr. McCoy and representatives met with our group to ask if we would be interested in moving to their location. We had the option of also staying at the community center. They offered the lobby and I was pleasantly surprised when we visited and saw that the lobby was part of a 10,000 sq. ft. atrium. Brian "Paco" Alvarez was our curator at the time. He accompanied me to the Sprint office. We looked around and agreed, "We're building walls." After we got approval, the process of transforming the atrium space began. Rob never thought we were going to go to that extreme, but we needed them. There were tiny wall spaces where we could only hang one or two paintings. Initially we built four large square structures enabling us to display close to 60 art pieces depending on size. Brian handled all of it. He acquired the materials, manpower and curated the first few exhibits. Artist Wilson Posada also helped prep the space.

After some time, we added two large triangular structures. The Lou Richardson construction company donated their time and materials for the extension. Our exhibit space grew 4-fold. We began to receive many comments about the beautiful displays and artifacts and how it enhanced the visit to the company, whose original purpose was not to be a museum. Mid-way through the growth of the museum, we learned about grants from the Nevada Arts Council, Humanities Committee and other community funders. The staff of the Nevada Arts Council took the time and had the support programming to aid growing non-profit organizations and emerging artists.

NV Energy, took a vested interest in the Memories in Art Senior Program, Embarq Corporation, El Mundo Newspaper Editor, the late Eddie Escobedo Sr., and other funders helped to keep the museum on par. The other person who made a difference in building the financial security of the museum was our grant writer Samuel Wright. We would go over the concepts that we wanted to develop and write the skeleton of the grant so later he would finesse it into a workable grant. The Sprint/Embarq building was our 5th location.

In 2009, we had to move out of the 10,000 sq. ft. space in the Embarq building and move back to the East Las Vegas Community Center. Embarq was moving to a new location in Henderson and so we were “free agents” again, so to speak. We have also had a display at the Cambridge Community Center due to the efforts of past County Commissioners Dario Herrera and Myrna Williams. Board member Zoraida Caldera took the responsibility of managing that display.

There are about twenty-one different Hispanic countries, so we reached out to the groups that had organized cultural groups in Las Vegas. Many of those groups would collaborate with the museum and organize art exhibits, theatre productions, dinners, dance recitals and even religious celebrations in that space. The building had a large staff kitchen which lent itself to use for our events. Sprint, then Embarq’s support was invaluable. As time went on, they added an office, storage, and the use of conference rooms so that we could handle our business in one location.

Going back to when you were an educator, when it came to teaching Latino students, how did you integrate the cultural aspects in your teaching?

Thank you for asking. At that time teaching was a little bit more holistic; even though we had a curriculum to follow, teachers could implement the content almost any way they wanted to. Now

the lessons are timed, and you are required to follow the curriculum to the letter. At that time culture was not something that was valued, especially Latino culture or any other culture besides the American culture. There was a lack of cultural competency. Many of the staff did not reflect the student population nor were they aware of cultural diversity. By the time I retired in 2011, one out of four students were of Hispanic descent.

I would bring in books, whatever books I could find, and celebrate all of the usual contributors, i.e., Cesar Chavez, as well as through school and library films. I would teach them about traditions and holidays. Culture was a jumping-off point for creative writing lessons. Earlier in my career, I was appointed to the CCSD Textbook Committee. This entailed reviewing textbook options to be used for seven years. I developed criteria to choose quality books. For example, up to date maps, graphs, inclusive photographs of the physically challenged and diverse illustrations.

During the 1990's the Multicultural Department at the CCSD was formed. I believe there were a few directors, but the one that made the most impact in my opinion was Greta Peay. The program held workshops on literature, multi-culturalism within the cultures, the number and ethnicity of students in general, and all the languages represented within the district, to name a few. The team thought outside of the box and attempted to expand educators thinking. The department recruited one person from each school to act as the Multi-Cultural liaison. One of the responsibilities of the liaison was to bring information and resources back to their particular school. I became one for several years whilst I changed schools.

Language was an issue with me when I would go to conferences and hear presenters or attendees say, "Oh, no, they're not speaking Spanish. They're speaking Chilean Spanish." I would say, "Yes but—the basic Spanish is from Spain, Castilian." And language is fluid. An example I used

was that if you're from England and you're speaking English or go to the south, East Coast, West Coast, and speak English you're speaking the same English, but you have different slang, dialects, accents, different rates of speed. I said, "That is true of all the Spanish speaking countries." I could go to Argentina and say, "*Tengo hambre*", and they'll understand, "I'm hungry." There are subcultures in each group as well as within families. In Spain, there are certain words with that T-H sound, but you could still understand it. It might take you a little while to adjust your hearing to what they're saying, but you know.

Did you ever take any field trips to the museum with your kids?

By the time the museum was organizationally ready to receive students into the museum in the form of field trips, we were located in the Embarq building. I was mainly teaching or in administration, so I did not personally have the time to give tours. In lieu of field trips, the Institute of Culture Youth Art Camp was a yearly event for over fifteen years, enrolling over an estimated seven-hundred youth. However, we had docents and volunteers who lead the field trips within the museum. I had already retired when we moved into the Boulevard Mall; so, I was able to coordinate all levels of field trips for preschool thru adults and seniors. We received positive reviews and many school and community groups returned. We made the experience interactive with either a dance lesson, an art session, a book reading, viewing a short film, and more. We wanted our attendees to feel the trip was worthwhile and that they had learned something about the diversity and contributions of the Hispanic culture when they visited.

We took full advantage of each space we received while portraying the locations in a positive light in the media. The City staff treated us with kindness and generosity. We held many exhibits in collaboration with other groups and artists. The East Las Vegas Senior Community Center became our 4th location.

This was a time of rapid growth of our programming. Some of the major events, programs, and events we sponsored were: Art Exhibits and Receptions, Emerging Artists Exhibits, Noche de Arte Silent Auction Gala, Institute of Culture Youth Day Camp, Las Vegas Latino Short Film Festival/Children's Latino Short Film Festival, Memories in Art Senior Program, Community Center Scholarships, Día de la Familia, Speaker Series, La Casa de la Cultura Latina, and community parades participation. The ability to create these programs and to have space to ensure that we could be a support system to the different cultures was key to our viability in the community.

The *Institute of Culture Youth Art Camp* was a summer cultural camp available to children ages five to fourteen years old. Students were given the opportunity to learn about Hispanic cultures through music, art, ethnic food and presentations. Over seven-hundred children experienced the Institute. Many local restaurants Florida Café Cuban Restaurant, Oiga, Mira y Veá Colombian Restaurant, El Coqui Puerto Rican Restaurant, Viva Las Arepas Venezuelan Restaurant, Las America & Mi Peru Peruvian Restaurants, Lindo Michoacán Mexican Restaurant, among others donated lunches to the campers over the years.

A highlight was when we organized a sleepover at the Nevada State Museum amongst the dinosaurs, while infusing the children with Hispanic culture and activities. Instructors from different genres, such as Claudio Ferriero, an award-winning photographer, and Ixela Gutierrez, the founder of the Mexico Vivo Dance Company, were important to the continuity of the program. She provided beautiful traditional garb for the children to wear while learning daily dance lessons; at first Mexican folkloric dance, then later from other countries. Gabriel Quiroz, General Manager at Univision taught the kids about how the camera works and took participants to the television station. After being trained, they sat in as Newscasters and weather forecasters.

They were so proud to be able to be seen by their parents on Channel 15. The camp was an excellent vehicle to move our mission of self-awareness and growth of cultural knowledge through the community, starting with the youth.

The *Memories in Art Senior Project* was designed to connect seniors with a trainer to teach them how to present their family traditions through storytelling. They would then share the stories with school children. It was a very worthwhile program, giving youth the chance to interact with elders, which at the time research noted was declining.

One example of a participant of the program was Otto Merida, the past director of the Latin Chamber of Commerce. He shared the story of how he came to the United States as a child through the Peter Pan program established by the United States without his parents. While sharing his story, the high school audience became very emotional, as did he. He explained that he had not shared that story in public for many years. As he spoke, an artist was interpreting the images of children coming from Cuba and landing in the United States.

Art Exhibits/Receptions and Emerging Artists Showcases featured quality artwork from seasoned and emerging artists. Genres included sculptures, photographs, textiles, pottery, and murals among others. The events were complemented with local and national entertainment, food and libations. Museum staff assisted artists with introducing their work in a formal setting, provided guidance on resources, marketing and installing exhibits.

The *Rae Arroyo Art Scholarships* were presented to qualified youth who were interested in music and art-related classes but lacked the financial resources to do so. Classes were chosen from community centers throughout the valley. It was our belief that children should be introduced to many experiences so they can make better choices as adults.

Field trips were facilitated for public and private schools, private events, community groups and international schools based in Las Vegas, and businesses.

The Noche de Arte Silent Auction Gala was held every other year. The event featured new talent, a silent auction of fine art and guest speakers. We held the gala for over fifteen years at locations such as the Stardust Hotel, East Las Vegas Community Center, the Palace Station and the Paris Hotel and Casino.

Día de la Familia (Family Day) an interactive bi-monthly event held Thursdays after school, aimed at unifying Families while creating pre-selected projects, such as painting on canvas, creating pinatas, collages, vision boards, and cooking traditional appetizers, to name a few. The activities were led by local artists, chefs and folk artists.

The Hispanic Museum of Nevada was the first to introduce the *Las Vegas Latino Short Film Festival in Southern Nevada*. Held every fall, the festival featured award winning “short” films from festivals held nationally and internationally. The event’s main event was to enrich the community’s awareness of Hispanic cultures through thought-provoking films representing films.

As a teacher I noticed that kids and adults in general’s attention span, was becoming very, very, short with the introduction of technology. We thought about how we could share quality films by Latino filmmakers and keep attendees’ attention. We surmised that people did not want to sit through long movies anymore, and we wanted to expose the community to complete, and interesting short films. The committee we formed wrote to Latino film makers and film organizations in diverse Latino countries. They reviewed all the submitted films. Only the best of the best were scored and chosen. The film festival was held at different venues until we

settled on the Springs Preserve Big Spring Theater. It was an elegant affair. We sold out five years straight.

It's still going on?

No. The last year that we held the festival, we tried something different, but too quickly. We tried expanding to include full length films, local filmmakers, involved cultural groups to provide concessions, added a panel discussion, and partnered with the College of Southern Nevada film department; and temporarily renamed it, The Las Vegas Latino Film Festival, omitting the short part. Alas, the festival was not successful. Too much, too soon.

We took a hiatus for a year, and when we were ready to have the eleventh film festival, we thought, ten years is a good amount of time to dedicate to an event. So, it is dormant for now. The Las Vegas Latino Short Film Festival was one of the most successful events we sponsored.

For example, what kind of cultures did you have at the first one?

I have to think, but I believe it was El Salvador, Mexico and Puerto Rico.

When was this? When was the first one?

The first festival matched the last one in ambition. It was held at the Charleston Heights Art Center and eighteen people attended. We were so ambitious. We used the entire location, provided food, a disc jockey, and brought in the star and the director of one of the movies from California. Councilwoman Shelley Berkley was also a special guest. The Chair of the film department at UNLV, Francisco Menendez, had recently completed a film so we screened his film. The second year we had about fifty-eight attendees, then the attendance doubled at the rest of the festivals. Then after that it kept growing. At the peak we had about two hundred and fifty, full house, sold out, all the time. We liked it like that. The space at the Big Springs Theatre at the Springs Preserve was intimate and comfortable. There were no bad seats in the theater. We

provided wine and hors d'oeuvres, and sometimes art or a pianist. It was a very classy event and successful for the time. The committee members and chairs were, Silvio Alava- Chair, Alicia Alava, Zayda Russiello- Chair, Judith Filipini-Chair, Veronica Fret, Damaris Fret, Jose Elique, Rose Elique, Jose Bolanos, Alvaro Rueda Gomez, and Felicia Alava. The late Silvio Alava took charge of contacting the filmmakers with the simplest of means, by sending a very short email, requesting a film, setting the stage for the success of this event. Volunteers were The Ornelas Family- Ricardo Sr., Lupe, Ricardo Jr., and Daniel, Ann Sanders, Ruben Dario Cruz, John Russiello.

The *Speaker Series* was well received. Two presentations that stand out were, *¿Y tu Abuela dónde está?* (And your grandmother where is she? Puerto Rico), moderated by Workforce Education Instructor and UNLV administrator, Cecilia Maldonado, the focus was to delve into racism in Spanish speaking countries. The saying points to the fact that during and after slavery in Puerto Rico and other Spanish speaking countries, some family members would keep family members with African ancestry, in the background. One highlight was the participation of an actor, named Antonio Fargas who portrayed *Huggy Bear* in the television program *Starsky and Hutch*.

Yogi Bear?

LOL. Huggy Bear. Have you ever heard of *Starsky and Hutch*? That was a popular tv show and it was very stereotypical. His character wore platform heels with fish in them. He currently resides in Las Vegas. He spoke about his challenges getting parts as a Latino in Hollywood, although he acted in a series on Telemundo.

The second notable presentation was about Indigenous populations. It highlighted the native languages and cultures in Hispanic countries. Perla Galeano from Paraguay led the exhibit

and demonstration of the Guarani dialect and the dialect from the indigenous people in Guatemala. The goals of the series were to delve into topics that are not normally discussed, to learn different aspects of Latino culture and to expand the community's horizons.

LAURENTS: *La Casa del Inmigrante? "La Casita"? La Casa de la Cultura Latina?*

So, this is how *La Casa de la Cultura Latina*, so named in 2011, came to be. It was one of the most important additions to the museum. Its' establishment was a way to meet the goal of creating a "permanent" space for each of the diverse Latino cultural groups who did not have a permanent home to showcase their individual cultures. The museum facilitated visibility and economic empowerment for the groups. Members were the directors of the groups or a representative of the country, who were eventually added to the board as a subgroup: Argentina- Josefina Ramirez, Bolivia- Freddy Chavez, Brazil- Sonia Reveli, Chile- Vivian Mehner, Colombia- Carmen Mahan, Costa Rica- Maritza Rodriguez, Cuba- Maria Caminero, Dominican Republic – Tina & Manuel Rivera, Ecuador- Nora Uribe, Guatemala- Israel Fuentes, Mexico- Mary Reyes, Nicaragua-Rosita Peralta, Panama- Lidia Bonilla, Paraguay- Perla Galeano Peru- Arturo Amaya, Puerto Rico- Letty Reyes, Spain- Margo Torea, Venezuela- Zoraida Caldera y Dalia Suarez. These groups became more collaborative and active when we moved into the Boulevard Mall site.

In 2011, the Boulevard Mall was going through a big transition resulting in many vacant retail spaces. Mr. Rick Jimenez, General Manager of the Boulevard Mall called and asked if we might be interested in filling one of the store fronts. Brian Paco was the person who referred us to Rick Jimenez. As Rick and I walked around the mall, I kept saying, "Too small. Too small." Then finally we came across a two thousand sq. ft. lovely space, an elegant, beautiful space; well

lit, nice white walls, with storage and a space for an office. We decided that we could really do something there.

Many of the personal members of the groups became active in different aspects of setting up the museum for the grand opening and beyond. They decorated the windows, set up the reception and membership areas, and equipment for serving food for the evening, as well as cleaning and painting. Arturo Amaya, the President of the Peruvian Association of Las Vegas, was responsible for painting many of the locations we have ever stepped foot in from then on. Sometimes it was him alone, and other times it was him and his crew. He was an extremely hard-worker and team player. We also brought on board our new curator Iris Nereida Guzman-Morales who had an eye for color and placement. It was a different skill set than a conventional curator, but she made the museum a showcase. She assisted the artists, sculptors, people who donated folk costumes, and cultural group leaders with positioning and staging. You could feel the excitement in the air.

Over four-hundred people attended the opening, including politicians, entertainers, artists, performers, and cultural group presidents. Staff at the mall said they had not seen so many people at the mall in some time. County Commissioner Chris Giunchigliani helped to cut the ribbon to the new location. Flamenco guitarist, Ricardo Griego greeted those waiting to enter the premises, with Spanish guitar music and flamenco dancers. Upon entering the museum that evening, they were greeted by artists painting, embroidering, group members setting up authentic food and Latin Jazz music; It was a feast, for the eyes, ears, and gastronomically. The board and the *Casa de la Cultura Latina* participants were elated! I was even fed chicken by the curator and helpers because they noticed I had not eaten all day and they said I needed protein. I was touched. Before the opening message, Letty Reyes, a member of the Puerto Rican Association

and educator, found my message to the audience and rewrote it neatly, so that it could be comprehensible to me as I read it. Hearts were wide open that day.

Earlier that year, before that evening, I had asked all the directors of the different cultural groups to meet at the Art Institute of Las Vegas for a major strategic planning meeting. I wanted to include all of them in the museum. I said, "You all have to come onboard because I am not an expert in Guatemalan textiles; or gauchos from Argentina; or Mexican mariachi music for example. I believed that we needed authentic input. They all agreed. It makes me emotional because it was so powerful to see all these people who had the same passion as we did, come together. The purpose of that meeting was to have them agree to work with us to build a bigger and better institution. We thought we were the Smithsonian, we always wanted to excel in our work and outcomes.

What kind of exhibits did you have?

In each space, we worked within our limitations and budgets. At the beginning, our exhibits were very holistic; displays of coins from the countries, flags, *quinceañera* items, generic photos of internationally known performers and information sold by school supply stores, and more.

The next step was to include more local artists, writers and poets to our repertoire. We gave them the platform to share their quality work. Later, we started bringing in international artists from Cuba, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Chile, Puerto Rico, Spain and other countries and national touring exhibits. Socially conscious theatre performers from Mexico (Women from Juarez) held at the Nevada State Museum, and from New York City (Diverse Women's Voices) held at the College of Southern Nevada Horn Theatre, and a Christmas play presented by the Venezuelan cultural group starring local actress Dalia Suárez, were presented as part of our season of live performances. Some of our notable exhibits were the Wall of Fame. The wall was the property of

board member Mario Uceda who purchased it from MTV, during an on-line auction. It was two large wall segments signed by famous personalities. The Hispanic Museum created another portion of the wall for local and international celebrities to sign during their visits to Las Vegas while attending events such as the Latin Grammys. Governor Brian Sandoval who was honored with a caricature portrait from talented artist Raffa Arvizu Garcia, also signed the wall as the first Latino governor in the state of Nevada. Individual exhibit spaces included fine art displays, collections, textiles, large scale sculptures created by the late sculptor Jesus Toloza. We also created an enclave showcasing of religious idols and related artifacts such as a statue of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, an altar for *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), *santos* (saints) of different countries, paraphernalia for *Santeria* (Yoruba religion), candles, rosaries and much more. Further, every group from *La Casa de la Cultura* had their own space to display unique artifacts representative of their countries. Woven throughout our exhibits we created programming.

You said you reached out to these groups. Did you reach out to the different Latino organizations, or how did you—?

Yes, we would attend folkloric recitals, art exhibit openings, theatre productions, connect with dance schools, attend Latino community meetings and speak to the directors or to the artists themselves. Many organizations and artists reached out to us.

In the United States the terms Hispanic or Latino are used in the Census as an overall umbrella for all the different countries, so we decided to name the museum The Hispanic Museum of Nevada. Then we were able to add the subtitle, *La Casa de la Cultura Latina*, because we included the other groups. We could not please everyone, but in my heart, I felt it was the start to introducing the community to this demographic and their contributions.

Our Curators over the years have been Ron Esparza, Ruben Romero, Brian “Paco” Alvarez, and Nereida Guzman-Morales and guest curators, like Vija Hamilton, an artist and art teacher, and artists who were exhibiting. All talented individuals.

Ron Esparza was our first curator. He had the ability to convert ideas to designs with just a conversation. Ron was instrumental in graphically bringing to life our early events for pamphlets, artistic labeling, and promotional materials. He designed our first logo, as well as all the signage for the displays and early activities. He created beautiful invitations for the *Noche de Arte* Galas held for several years.

Ruben Romero brought the museum into the 21st century as far as how to display exhibits with a minimalistic slant versus crowding display cabinets and walls with artwork. He really made his mark when we held the first traveling exhibit of local Latino artists called the Latino Pride Exhibit. The artwork of over fifteen artists traveled for a year, to museums, galleries and other art locations throughout the city. Many times, Ruben brought his entire family to work on the setups of the exhibits, taking time out of his administrative job in the community.

Brian “Paco” Alvarez, a valuable community cultural activist held an important role in the life of the museum when it was located at the 330 S. Valley View Blvd. site, inside of the Sprint and then Embarq building for six years. Brian set the tone for including different art forms, such as murals, sculptures, photography, and promotion of our brand as an institution. He was instrumental in adding local artists to the museums’ artist rooster. With his large personality and experience from the Liberace Museum and other attractions, he was able to lend his experience and arts community resources knowledge to help us grow artistically.

These last few years we have had the good fortune of enlisting Nereida Iris Guzman-Morales as the curator for the museum for at least six years. Nereida’s real talent as a well-

known Fung Shei instructor in the community, was her use of color to unify spaces, and designing spaces for maximum visual impact. The artifacts, collections and artwork would look better when she curated. Her placement of collections was positioned so that nothing obstructed your view. She also assisted in curating the spaces we shared with the Latin Chamber of Commerce at the Rafael Rivera Community Center during this time frame. Nereida was our last Curator.

David Ozuna, a graphic artist and founder of One Bear Art Productions also deserves a heartfelt mention, as he designed every large sign and banner for all of our programs we created since the inception of the museum, making us look very professional.

I believe in “giving credit where credit is due”. I feel bad because we were not able to pay them what they were worth and what the going rate was for these museum professionals. Before a Strategic Planning Meeting in the early Spring of 2011, and before the grand opening at the Boulevard Mall, the UNLV Architecture Department instructor Adrian Jones called me. He said, "We'd like to try to design a museum for you. We would like to discuss your needs." I said, "Well, it's perfect timing because we're having a strategic planning meeting and you can be half of the meeting." We planned to conduct all the museum business during the first half of the meeting and dedicate the second half to the future of the museum by focusing on the UNLV group.

The instructor Adrian Jones, brought five students with him to the meeting at the Art Institute of Las Vegas, and they asked each one of the board members and cultural group leaders, questions like, for example, what was their vision for the museum? What are our needs? How much space do you think you need? It was just an incredible day. We were glowing from the anxiousness of the prospect of having this made for us.

After a month or two, they invited us to see the finished project. They had actual 3D designs, virtual videos, created an eighteen by twelve spiral bound book after researching Hispanic culture, other designs, sq. footage, needs of the Nevada community, precedents, and parity; the decision behind an architect's design. They surmised that we did not need ten thousand square feet but actually forty thousand square feet. They came to that conclusion because our programs required things like a theater for the film festival, classrooms for the institute and training, exhibit space, and much more. We were happy that they took into consideration our programming because, we tried very hard to make sure that it fit the needs of the community. When we told them about the things we were doing, they were writing everything down. They did not create only one design to that intricacy, but *five*. They created 3D structures and virtual videos of them; they did actual models of them. We were blown away beyond words. They noted that this "book" could be given to any contractor, because the designs were built to specification. We were flabbergasted. The design students are: Alexia Hsin Chen, Rhett Noseck, Torry Tracy, Blaine Verlanic, and Noel Williams. The Boulevard Mall was the sixth location for the Hispanic Museum of Nevada.

After we closed in 2017, with the expectation of opening in the future, a few of the people affiliated with the museum opened spaces in locations around the city. Because of the fact that the groups had different political statuses, educational systems, traditions, even additional languages (Indigenous), they focused on what their needs are. Many of them, although they were involved with the museum, did not have their 501 (c)(3) status and wanted to extend their reach politically. With a 501(c)(3), we really couldn't do that. We could focus on those topics in our speaker series, film festivals, exhibits about the political landscape; for example, artist Penny

Ramos- Bennet's socially conscious artwork. We had to explain the ramifications of having open political events to them.

The building that those architecture students planned out, was that ever realized?

Not yet! After we moved three times to larger (estimated 1,000, 4,000, 6,000 square feet) sites in the Boulevard Mall, the mall was planning to renovate and reinvent itself to include more interactive family-oriented activities, such as indoor rock climbing, miniature golf, a theatre and more. Across from the museum they had already constructed a Sea World attraction. Sansone Company owned by Roland Sansone had sponsored the location for the Hispanic Museum of Nevada since they purchased it in 2014. We handled the funding of all events, exhibits, programming, employees, upkeep of art, curator, exhibits, and maintenance. When we were asked to move to a smaller spot at the mall, we considered it.

A couple of articles made it seem as if the Sansone Company, and General Manager Timo Kasuula, had asked us to leave. That could not be further from the truth. They simply asked us to move to a much smaller location within the mall temporarily. The Sansone Company and the museum had one very significant shared vision. They wanted to make a positive impact in the lives of the community members. They did so by growing the Boulevard Mall into a vibrant, community space, where people could feel safe and meet their needs; as did we; their cultural and diverse social needs.

By that time our collection had grown considerably. The last move to a larger space at the end of 2016 showed us the magnitude of having to relocate 6,000 plus square feet of art related equipment and artifacts, *very carefully*. Everyone, including families, artists, curator, Casa members, volunteers, friends, paid workers, board members and sponsors pitched in to move us to that larger spot. Notably Julie Gluth, an active member, participant and volunteer, and her

husband came out very early in the moving process and did not leave until there literally was not one paper left in the 4,000 square foot location. I watched as Stavan Corbett brought his family, to help us pack and move items. I do not forget. People took time and energy out of their lives to help us with our vision, throughout the twenty plus years. I locked the doors with Julie Gluth and her husband in front of me.

In 2017 when we had to decide to accept the smaller site at the mall, the board of trustees and the members of the Casa de la Cultura decided to move only if we were moving into our own building. We let go of the beautiful, nurturing location we had. We could not physically nor mentally, move another piece of artwork or artifact. That was in 2017.

We have not planned for this time frame adequately. After over 25 years, we were ready to take an extended hiatus. I could say that was leadership's decision. Over the course of the growth, the museum had received funding for programming and particular events, and entry fees, and commission from sales had helped pay for operational needs within the museum; however, we did not fully implement a succession plan for when we reached this stage.

We were enjoying the moment. It was productive. We were relishing in the moment when we would help our fellow artists, community groups, and educate the public about the traditions, celebrations and contributions to our community, society and the world through our programs.

What year, right now?

Now and part of last year. We said, "We're not going to do anything until we have everything in order so that we do not come to this point where we're like, we're exhausted. We're not doing anything." But I say it was fate because a negative climate towards Latinos began to emerge—I really believe in things happening for a reason.

What was inspiring you throughout this whole process to establish that museum? How did you teach your kids about your culture?

I started the museum to honor my parents and so that my three sons would have a place to learn about their Hispanic roots, and no one here had that. Since they were young, they were learning about our culture through real life experiences; interacting with their extended family, spending time in New York and Puerto Rico with the grandparents, listening to classic Salsa and traditional music, eating typical foods, attending a Spanish church, and being an active part of the Puerto Rican Association. But I wanted them to have a permanent place to visit. I knew the value of a museum. As time went on, they were learning through action because they were there helping with exhibits and helping me with whatever had to be done.

The other thing that really energized me/us was the reaction of the community. They wanted to see their flag and artifacts displayed. At the Boulevard Mall, I would hear passer-byers say, "Oh, this is a Mexican museum?" I would say, "Um, yes and no. Come in, please." We would enlighten them.

This was another thing that surprised me—a lot of people have not been to museums here in the United States or from different countries. They don't really know what a museum is, or they had a pre-conceived notion.

The reaction from the community, the reaction from people who were utilizing the space—because all these groups, they didn't have a place to rehearse. They didn't have a place to show their dances, authentic garb, artifacts and things like that. We provided that. Everybody had the same amount of space and the same amount of wall space. If somebody came in and they saw that it was sparse and they happened to be from that country, they'd say, "I'm going to bring you

something." Some of our permanent collection came from donations and a lot of displays came from artists and artisans.

There is no doubt in my mind that I was being led through faith to do this project. From the beginning, doors would open to provide our needs. I never worried about where the funds, artists, or equipment would come from. I felt that the project was out of my hands, in a good way.

LAURENTS: *Everyone has their own items at the moment? Everyone is holding their own collection?*

Yes and no. The Casa de la Cultura Latina members, artists, community members who were collectors, regular people who wanted to add to our existing collection from their country brought items in, and when we shuttered, all of these entities, came to retrieve the items they wanted returned. The remaining items became part of the museum's personal collection.

Or is it all together in one?

Yes. Since then, we have liquidated a lot of equipment, such as pedestals, mannequins and display cabinets to other museums and non-profits. The items that we still have are, God willing, going to be used in our new location or for demonstrations at businesses and schools.

The core of the Hispanic Museum of Nevada was the bond we had created with the community: the people, the volunteers, the sponsors, and all the other helpers who made the museum a living entity during those active years, showing that they had passion and respect for the culture.

I don't remember all of the names, but I remember their intention and a substantial amount of them. Thank you to all of them, from the bottom of my heart.

Board Members: Ophelia Gomez, Irma Wayans, Carmen Mahan, Jose Melendrez, Eloiza Martinez, Norma Rivera, Sam Wright, Martha Amalbert, Mario Uceda, Elias Samorano, Edgar

Flores, Leticia Mitchell , Alvaro Aguirre, Stan Saito, Irma Wynants, Ed Garcia, Margie Rosado, Carmen James, Mary Resendez, Beatriz Rueda, Iza Garcia, John Lechuga, Aurelio Valerezo Duenas, Margie Rosado, Larry Mason, Judy Fleischman, Felicia Alava, Edward Garcia, Zoraida Caldera, David Osman, Sonia Reveli, Alvaro Rueda, Marlene Monteolivo, Yvette Chevalier, Nancy Alamo, Yolanda Pierce, Steven Brooks, Judith Velez-Filippini, Casa de la Cultura Latina presidents.

Masters of Ceremonies: Monica Lausso Prado, Eduardo Torres, Francisco Virella, Annette Reveneau, Jose Elique,

Artists: Wilson Posada, Claudio Ferreiro, Juan D. Valera, Penny Ramos-Bennett, Adolfo Gonzalez, Arturo Aguirre, Jesus Toloza, Lois Esparza, Ron Esparza, Jorgelina Ramirez, Raffa Arvizu Garcia, Aldo Aquirre, Johnny Romero, Veronica Fret, Damaris Fret, Delores Del Valle, Eduardo Torres, Elia Canales, Gustavo Molina, Flor Mendez, Lily Ramos, Carlos Lausso, John Pacheco, Penny Ramos Bennett, Jessica Gallindo, Juan Valera, Johnny Castillo, Samy Ganas Sr., Samy Ganas Jr., Vicente Calvo, Victor Aguirre, Jose Guadalupe Posada- art exhibit, Jhosy Jimenez, Sin City Bikes, Marce Tuteru,

Performers: Flavio Martinez, Fernando Lopez, Louie Navarro, Maria Brito, Cathy Mia Mosquera, Johnny Panama, Genaro Ortiz, Larry Sanchez, Monica Ortiz, Andres Gonzalez, Sylvette & George, Sin City Salseros, Antonio Fargas, Santa Joe, Teo Huitzil

Media Coverage: Arturo Amaya, Monica Prado Lausso, Cety Tinoco, Hernando Amaya, Penny Ramos Bennett, El Mundo Newspaper, Tiempo Libre, Roberto Pelaez Romero, Humberto, Polanco, Abel Ortiz-Inda, Francisco Alejandre, Gabriel Quiroz, Raul Collazo, Chris Roman, Adriana Arevalo, Channels 3, 5, 8, 13, 9, 15

Parade Committee: Ramon Savoy-Sentinel Voice Newspaper, Iza & Mr. Garcia, Geri Babero, David Ozuna, Ms. Licitra, Christina Alava, Mr. & Mrs. Jacuinde- Irene Jacuinde made all the costumes representing the Hispanic countries for all of the children who participated, Gloria Garcia & family

Staff, Volunteers, Supporters, Parents, Donors: Carmen James, Boulevard Mall- Timo Kusaala, Yvette Alicea, Isabel Jurado, Joseph Sawyer, Marcello Sawyer, Isaac Sawyer, Al Martinez, Louis Gomez, Susan Gomez, Robert Gomez, Rebecca Schnetslaar, Gary Reese, Tony Gladney, Isabel Pheifer, Sandy Colon Peltyn–Women of Distinction, Kelly Benavitez, Shelley Berkley, Judi Steele, Thomas Rodriguez, Alma Garcia-Vining, Salvador Avila, Christina Martinez, Beatriz A. Gutierrez, Teresa Sweeten, Irene Bustamante Adams, Olivia Diaz, Merlinda Gallegos, Domingo Cambiero, Maria Chairez, OJ Sydor- Walmart, Jon Garde, Robert & Susan Gomez, Mexican Consulate of Las Vegas, Andres & Jackie Ramirez, Jackie Ingram, Otto Merida, Bob Coffin, Liliam Hickey, Kendall Hardin, Julie Wilcox, Rene Cantu Jr., Doreatha Eason, Suzie Sepulveda, Irene Jacuinde, Victor Jacuinde, Debbie Holleran, Andres & Jackie Ramirez, Chris Roman, Geri Babero, Patty Jimenez Correa, Juergen Barbusca, College of Sounthern Nevada, Michi Conde, Ann Sanders, Christina Alava & Osvaldo AdeOba A. Morales, Cuchi Clemente, Dante & Bernadette Davila, Derek Washington, Anika Johnson, Marlene Adrian, Lupita, Astrid Guzman, Ozzie, Jenny Rosado, Myrna Malone, Letty Sanchez Reyes, Aleyda Hernandez, Chris Roman, Chris Saldana, Claudio & Elvira Ferreiro, Christian Gerlach, Edwin Pineda, Otto Merida, and all of the politicians of Nevada

Do you have any last anecdotes or stories that you would like to share?

I want to thank the UNLV Latinx Project for giving me the opportunity to tell our story. Those individuals and so many more put their hearts and souls into the projects and the story needed to be told.

Many countries in the world have museums and people visit those museums in search of history, knowledge, culture and understanding. I visited a tiny museum in Bermuda and was thrilled. It was still a museum, regardless of the size. When I hear about what happens in war-torn places; how they topple monuments and destroy museum artifacts and fine art; things that have been around for thousands of years, my heart aches. They don't realize that that is history, their history.

I would like to see the community taking an active role in helping to share and shape the manner in which we share our contributions, and history with their own families, the community and internationally. We started it but we don't have to finish the cultural story of Nevada's Latino population. Nevada has that capability due to its unique position as a tourist attraction. I would like to see our youth step in to become cultural forces. Thank you again for this invaluable opportunity.

Wonderful.

LAURENTS: *Thank you so much.*

Yes, thank you.

My pleasure!

[End of recorded interview]

APPENDIX



Panama Presentation at the Hispanic Museum of Nevada



Casa de la Cultura Latina Directors and Clean-Up Session



Film Festival Committee



Social gathering with members of the Casa de la Cultura and artists at Lynnette Sawyer's home



Community Activists (Left to Right): Puerto Rican Margarita Rebollal, Colombian Carmen Mahan, Brazilian Sonia Revieli, Lynnette Sawyer, and Guatemalan Rosita Peralta



Juan D. Valera Exhibit Reception with Artists (Left to Right) Ricardo Rico, Jesus Toloza, Raffa Arvizu, Jorge Betancourt, and Juan D. Valera



The Institute of Culture Youth Art Camp at the Hispanic Museum of Nevada



Día de Familia (Family Day) at the Hispanic Museum of Nevada



Calle Julian Pesante in Puerto Rico is named after her maternal grandfather.



Lynette Sawyer with her interviewers, Nathalie Martinez and Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez.