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Interview with Milga Morales Nadal
Interviewed by Pam Sporn and Tami Gold

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

Milga Morales Nadal So my family's from a very small town in Puerto Rico. The name of the town is Guayanilla. It's actually the southern part of the island near Ponce, for those of us who know the island fairly well. It's a place where in the old days, you'd have to travel at least three hours from the San Juan airport, through the mountains to get to go Guayanilla. And then to get to many of the places where we lived, when we were young, when we were children, where my family is from, of people, mostly the mountainside, some of us in the city in Guayanilla, but Guayanilla is very small, my husband always said that if you, you know, go through it, it's like you would never know you were there, because it's so small. But it's really not. It's a vast piece of land. But a lot of it is concentrated in small little houses, around the countryside. And my family came from a place called La Playita. Of course, la playa, people know that it's about the beach, but wasn't really a beach, it was just, you know, near the water, and the homes there were made out of wood. And my mother always told me that, when I would ask her about, do we have photos when we were kids when we were very, very young. And she always said, No, because the ocean would come and just wipe everything away. And this was like a normal occurrence for those of people that live near La Playita. So obviously, coming from that area, you would know that come from whatever, say modest, modest, if not poor, economically, but very rich in tradition, in the sense that my family always held in their hearts, Puerto Rico as a very important place for them, and taught us all about our history and culture, or at least tried to when we were when we were young. Now, what I remember is that at I guess two and a half, and I don't really recall the

details, when people tell me these things, my family decided that they needed to come to New York. And they did it for various reasons, as I understand it. One of them was because jobs, there was very little job opportunity in Puerto Rico, my father was a great cook. So he and my mother decided to put up a place that they called, like a friambreira. A friambreira is when you put food in three different vessels, and you put the rice in one and the beans and another one and something to eat like some kind of meat or something or maybe vegetables in the other one. And he, they used to prepare friambreiras for the people in the community and the people that we're going to work. So that was the kind of business that they had. But clearly it wasn't, you know, very lucrative. It wasn't anything that they can really live off. And by then, they my mother had my sister from another marriage and my father, between my father, and my father actually had a son as well from another marriage. And so they're blended family. And then of course, the three of us came along myself as the oldest and then two brothers. But my brothers were not born in Puerto Rico, they went to New York City.

So when we were there in Puerto Rico, my father was also very active, politically. He wasn't involved in what they call la massacre de Ponce and a situation that happened in Puerto Rico, which is a situation that happened in Puerto Rico, where many people were killed in, basically support, of the independence of Puerto Rico. They were marching. And it happened that the police started shooting. So with the massacre in Ponce, my father was not directly involved, but he was definitely a simpatizante, he definitely sympathize with the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico. So we've talked about the economy, then we talk about the politics. And for at least those two reasons, if not more, my parents decided that they needed to come to New York. So there's always a little discrepancy in terms of when he really came here. Recently, I found a little membership card for a union, and it said 1947, so I was born in 1947. So that means that my father was actually in New York. So I didn't realize that he probably, they had me and then they left. And that's why I think I was also very close to my extended family including my uncle, because they left us with my uncle in Guayanilla in Puerto Rico.

[01:05:05]

My parents came here and as I understand it, also they tried to find a place to live, it was very hard to find a place to live, they counted on their friends, who had come before them. My father wound up living Manhattan somewhere, my mother in Brooklyn somewhere, again, as I understand it. And even at one point, I was told that they didn't even know where the other one was, you know, when they came for the first few days in the first few, first few weeks, but they finally got a little place to live. So we wound up in, first we wound up in an area called Williamsburg, which obviously, it is not the same area, that it is today for those people that

know Brooklyn and know Williamsburg, it was kind of an industrial area, close to a place called Greenpoint, a lot of warehouses around there. We lived there for a little while I'm in a project, the projects. And we were here myself, my sister and now my two brothers who actually were born in New York City. We grew up, you know between Williamsburg and Bushwick, there's another area in Brooklyn, and went to the public schools in that, in in those communities. I remember that at one point, we, my family decided that they needed to move they needed to find a place to live. So we wound up in downtown Brooklyn the area that's called Gowanus. So that area was really changing, it first, it was mostly Italian when we got there, then by the time we were there are a few years, the community was totally Puerto Rican. We had a great sense of community. We knew everyone in the neighborhood, all the families knew each other. And it was a wonderful place to grow up, in my parents were both active in their jobs, particularly as union members, my mother was active with local 1199, which was the Hospital Workers Union. I used to go with my mother to the various union activities, including the strikes and the protests, and the rallies. And I think that's kind of where I learned first, to kind of stand up for myself and hopefully for and for others as well. And my father was also very active in the hotel workers, many of the people that came especially the men at that time, would find jobs working as lavapotes, first because you had to learn how to wash the cans that they use, because they actually recycled pretty well in those days. And then you kind of worked your way up to a lavaplato, where you can learn, you can actually learn how to wash the dishes and make sure you did that well, to the point where he became what they called a cold order cook. And he worked at the Sheraton Russell Hotel in New York. Those were hard very hard times for us. But at the same time, very, very familial. Lots of activities at home, lots of, one of the things that we always did was celebrate everybody's birthday. I mean, there was one thing even a small cake, no presents, or maybe a little present, you know, my brothers always complained that they gave him the socks and underwears. And that's all they got, ever got.

Milga Morales Nadal But they really tried to keep our family together and keep the extended family together. We had very great relationships with the Guyanillenses people from Guyanilla, that came to New York. And so there were a lot of those different organizations here that represented the hometown groups, and lots of people, lots of Puerto Ricans joined those groups. And my family definitely was very involved with our hometown group, we had all sorts of activities every Friday, Saturday, you know, we would go into the, into the train, and we would have we would, have to make arroz cong gandules, you know, the rice with peas, so that we could take it to the activities that we were celebrating, whatever, whatever it was. And I always remember taking pernil, which is the pork you know that that smells beautifully, but in the train, and I would be a little bit embarrassed

that everybody was looking at us because they smelled the pork. But it was at the same time, very happy time is when everybody worked very cooperatively with each other and there wasn't much money coming in from different areas like later on like the poverty program and poverty programs and money coming from the federal government. So it was really communities helping each other in those days, especially the hometown groups.

Pam Sporn

What schools did you go to and what? What was the? What was your schooling like?

Milga Morales Nadal [00:10:07]

So definitely, definitely went to public schools. And I remember that the school that I went to in the Williamsburg area was on Starr Street. It was small school, still exists today. In fact, I, one of my, one of my students from when I was teaching in College actually wound up being a teacher there. So I got to see that school way later on. And it's interesting, because when I went there, it reminded me so much of how we grew up in, and how we went to school and how we were, I guess, educated. And it was pretty much of a drill type of place. In other words, the children were sort of marched along to do things, and which was, interesting, just recently, and you know, here I am, and I'm seeing the kids being sort of marched in and marched out. And we were taught, I think a lot of basic things, like a lot of hygiene was taught in the schools, they wanted to make sure that we came clean, you know, to school, I remember that they used to make a big thing about what breakfast did you have today. And, of course, I've heard a lot of people talk about this, we would always lie, we would always say that we had orange juice and that we had toast. And that we had milk, when actually most of us had coffee in the morning, because that's what we were used to and everybody drank coffee, you didn't have a special breakfast for you, everybody drink coffee. And we would have some probably sliced Wonder Bread or something like that. But there was a lot of emphasis on us, I guess, coming into the schools and folks wondering if we were clean enough, if we were prepared enough. And so there was a lot of concentration on that. I mean, I remember getting weighed in school, you know, all of the things that people now do when they go to the doctor's, but that was all done in the school. I remember also, one day, one special day, when we were going to be weighed, and I had my socks on. And we had to take off our shoes, so we could get weighed. And I had a little hole in my sock. I was so embarrassed. It was one of those times when you go like, you know people don't know what's going on in your brain, right? Teachers don't know. But in my head, was what was going on was, Oh, please, I'm going to be so embarrassed when I take off this shoe. So a little thing. But those are the kinds of things that that we had, I guess, deal with internally.

Pam Sporn

Were the teachers, what was the make up of the teaching faculty.

Milga Morales Nadal I guess talking in terms of today, we wouldn't there would be no teachers of color working in the schools that at least I went to. It was primarily teachers probably from German backgrounds from, maybe Jewish I'm not sure because I wasn't sure in terms of the religion, but Italian backgrounds, possibly but not, you know, not too many. Mostly, I think they were mostly European. You know that their families were a second or third, they were second or third generation from their families. Yeah.

Pam Sporn Do you remember having any Puerto Rican teachers?

Milga Morales Nadal I don't think I ever saw a Puerto Rican teacher until, I'm trying to think yeah, probably until college. I never saw a Puerto Rican teacher. I wasn't, I've never had any experience with Puerto Rican teachers in school. In fact, I had an experience with, maybe an African American teacher in high school. No Asian teachers. Yeah.

Pam Sporn Wondering if the fact that you came from a Spanish speaking family was seen as a as a deficit or an asset by your...

Milga Morales Nadal Yeah, no, absolutely. The focus was on, on English. And there was definitely not something that was encouraged for you to speak another language. We definitely grew up as being treated as immigrants even though we weren't really immigrants. We were migrants coming from, U.S. citizens coming from Puerto Rico. But we were definitely seen as different. And the school for me, I always felt the school was really trying to make us be this thing that they wanted us to be. And I did have friends that were Italian and from other backgrounds. And so for us, you know, we obviously picked up English right away. My father learned some English on the job. My mother also learned some English, she always, she always told, told us that she knew English very, very well and we would go, okay. And because, you know, she did she, she was able to communicate, because she wanted us, and I think many parents were like this, they wanted us to feel like they were helping us to assimilate, and not to be treated differently, because to be treated differently was certainly to be treated in a negative way. So they, they, it wasn't that they encouraged us to speak English, but they tried to learn English as well. And having a sister who was a little bit older than me, she brought English into the home early on. So we would have the conversations where my father would speak in Spanish, and we would answer in English. And my father's every once in a while would throw in an English word, but not too many. But definitely, we were back and forth with English and Spanish that my experience with the language, unfortunately, at that time, was that I didn't really know either language that well, because we were too back and forth. And there wasn't any emphasis really on, on maintaining Spanish. So it wasn't until I guess I was in high school that I really understood that it was

an asset to have the language it was certainly not something that was promoted in the schools.

Pam Sporn

[00:16:34]

Did that present, the fact that you, you said you, you didn't feel like you had a command of either one. Did that create challenges in terms of your academic...

Milga Morales Nadal Yeah, I always felt that I could converse in English. But I always felt that if I would have had more emphasis and more instruction in my native language, I could have transferred those skills to the English, it would have made it easier for me. And I would have been a better English student, speaker of English, but also academic English, and also of Spanish. And I think that probably is something that a lot of our young people still, are going through. And definitely went through...at least my generation went through that.

Pam Sporn

Right. So were you ever ashamed that Spanish was spoken in your household. Can you tell me something about that?

Milga Morales Nadal Yeah. So in my case, because we were very connected to our hometown group, the Spanish was pretty...in the, in the environment in a natural way. So I didn't think of it as I didn't think of it as a negative. But when we moved into the neighborhood, I mentioned before downtown Brooklyn, it was Bergen street, in the Gowanus area. And we came across other communities in that case, the Italian community. They would actually, some comments were made, to us. Why are you speaking that language? And what are you? I'm Puerto Rican. Well, you shouldn't say that you are that. Maybe you should say your you could even say your Spanish, but don't say you're Puerto Rican. So there were there were, there were comments that were made. But I guess I, I benefited a lot from growing up with folks that were using the language quite a bit when I would go to the different activities, the language was appreciated. And so I think that that was always there. You know, the language was appreciated. I, I didn't know it well enough. Unfortunately, I understood it. So I can't say that I was embarrassed by it. My brothers sometimes tell me yes, you are. Yes, you were, you wanted to be Italian at one point, I don't remember that, maybe it was so traumatic, I don't remember that. But I can see where yeah, there was very uncomfortable moments when folks would remind you that you were not, you know, like them, and therefore but also not like them and also that you were not as good as they were.

Pam Sporn

What did you learn about the history and/or culture of Puerto Rico or Latin America, in school, during your schooling from elementary through high school?

Milga Morales Nadal [00:19:34]

Oh, my God, that's one of the things that probably I would say biggest deficit that you know, that that we had, and I certainly had also as a, as a young person. I had the cultural experience of being around Puerto Ricans and being from people from my hometown. But clearly there was nothing in the school. It was all just our communities. You know, what our communities shared with each other, what our communities brought in, what our communities brought from, from Puerto Rico, the back and forth that, that I was able to hear the songs and I was able to hear the music and become familiar with those things very early on. My father was a, he had the great gift of gab. But he was also a bohemio, he was a kind of person that knew every single song there was about Puerto Rico, including Mexico and all the other Latin American countries. And so we were exposed to that, at home, and in the community.

But definitely, school was completely void of that, there was nothing there. And I remember that so well, because I remember, they said, at one point, I think, I think was in high school, that they said, you should write a report about, you know, some country that you're interested in, and I thought, all right about Puerto Rico. And I looked around, and I had nothing, nothing written. I knew my family stories and music and all of that, but there was nothing written anywhere. And my father had gotten this bunch of National Geographic magazines, from his hotel that they were going to throw out. And he thought, oh, let me take them home. Because maybe the kids, you know, can get something out of them. And I went through them. And I found a National Geographic with pictures of Puerto Rico and I said oh my God, this is like a treasure. And I took that National Geographic, and probably shouldn't have done it, because it was just something we should probably should have treasured for a long time. But I started cutting it out. And that's how I got my report. But that was it. There was absolutely nothing, nothing. It's very unfortunate.

Pam Sporn

How did your teacher receive that report about Puerto Rico?

Milga Morales Nadal You know, it was very interesting, because I had one teacher, who apparently had been to Puerto Rico. And this is the thing that we faced as young Puerto Ricans coming up in New York. She knew that I was Puerto Rican. And so and then the report, and she said, oh, I've been to Puerto Rico, you must know, el Yunque, and you must know, San Juan. And I said no, I've never been to Puerto Rico. So it was those kinds of little encounters that made you feel like, I don't really, I am sort of from there. But I don't really know enough about there. And I certainly wasn't getting it in school. So you know, I think we were bringing it into the school actually, at that point.
(silence)

Pam Sporn You were born in Puerto Rico. But you had never been back to Puerto Rico.

Milga Morales Nadal Yeah.

Pam Sporn How do you see yourself as a Puerto Rican...

Milga Morales Nadal Yeah, it was, it was when I was, I guess I was 16 years old. My sister got married. And, and she and her husband said, we're going to go to Puerto Rico. And I was like, excited about that. Because, again, I had all this culture here. But you know, didn't know what was going on in the island. I'd never been there. And I was already sort of getting a consciousness, a political consciousness was sort of developing, in terms of seeing the haves and the have nots and wanting to know more about, so what is you know, what's really going on there? Because I hear negative comments about Puerto Ricans here. And I'm wondering, how, how did that come about? You know why I'm so proud of who I am, as Puerto Rican and it was hard for me to reconcile them. I went to Puerto Rico. And it was quite traumatic for me, traumatic for me, because one of the things that I did immediately when I got on the island, I just kept on talking English. I kept on speaking English. Now, that would have worked if we stayed in San Juan, but we're from a small town in Guyanilla. Nobody there at that time was speaking English. And my sister who was a bit more fluent than I was, she had spent a couple of more years in Puerto Rico than I did. And she, at one point said to me, Milga, you can't speak, you can't speak English here. You have to speak Spanish. And I was like, I don't know, I was just taken aback. And I felt like, okay, that means I'm gonna be quiet for the rest of the time that I'm in Puerto Rico, because I can't speak Spanish. And she was kind of ashamed that if I would make mistakes in Spanish, you know. So it was really, so that was traumatic, but I loved being there. I loved seeing the island that I didn't remember that well. I did focus a lot on looking at the more, I guess the older structures, you know, what was going on in the island. And that was the time when people were going like, the island had to give it, more be more industrialized. And folks were already starting to get into fast foods, you know, those kinds of things. And I said well, you know, can we go and eat like the food of Puerto Rico? You know, what's the food of Puerto Rico? Oh, no. All these changes were taking place. And they were saying, No, let's go and have a hamburger. So but I didn't come to Puerto Rico to have a hamburger. So I, you know, it was very, it was kind of confusing, actually. And a bit traumatic. But that was my first experience. You know, from then on, you know, I had different experiences there. But that was definitely my first experience. I wanted to know more, though, that's one of the things that it did.

Pam Sporn [00:25:38]

So, tell me about how you ended up at Brooklyn College.

Milga Morales Nadal Okay, so I said that I lived in the Gowanus area. My father, when I was leaving, my junior high school, graduated from a junior high school, my father said, you have to go to a school where there's no boys. And, you know, my, he always thought something's going to happen, because those, that's what happened to a lot of young girls, you know, they would get pregnant at like 15 years old. And so that was something that was always on his mind. And as a person that worked all day long, cause he worked from five o'clock in the morning, overtime, you know, I mean, the overtime until about at least 10 o'clock at night, he wasn't around very much. So he was always afraid that something was going to happen to us. And, you know, that was one of the things, so I won't go into an all girls school, it was called Bay Ridge High School at the time. That, that experience there, was an experience that, I guess it was good, and not so good. It was good because yeah, we focused a lot, because you know, you didn't get involved with anybody, there was no real well, at least for me, there was no relationships at all, except outside of the school. But leaving, leaving that school was again, good and complicated and challenging. Because when I was about to graduate, I guess that last year in Bayridge, wound up in Bay Ridge High School, I was about to graduate that last year, I wasn't the greatest student in the world is, you know, some of the background, you know, definitely showed up, but I was trying very hard. And I didn't know that I wanted to go to college. I did over hear my father, at one point saying to my mother in Spanish, dile a Milga que no, yo no tengo dinero para que ella pueda ir a la Universidad, you know, basically saying I don't have the money to send her to college. And the expectation those days was that you were going to go out and get a job and bring some money and not be dependent upon, the upon the family. So what I did is I applied for what they called a Standard Oil Company scholarship. And the scholarship was basically to train for executive secretaries. So that was very important, because I wouldn't be just a secretary, I would be an executive secretary. So that was a big thing. And I actually got it, I got it, I got the scholarship. So that would have meant that that year at the end of my my high school, I would have gone into that program, starting that that summer. I wasn't a very good typist. I wasn't a very, I wouldn't have been a very good secretary at all. But it was something, you know, especially if I wasn't going to go to college. But in the high school, that same, I guess it was probably April through through June those, those months right before graduation. I had a friend in the school, her name was, my last name was Morales, her last name was Morales also, Carmen, and Carmen had been accepted into a program called the College Discovery Program. There was only about four or five slots that were given to the school. Every school I guess, had a few slots. And there was an opportunity to start at a community college. And they would give you, provide you with a stipend and they would provide you

with some transportation money. So we weren't, so if one of us got it, we wouldn't be, we wouldn't be dependent so much on our families and we'd still have to work but not so much. So, one morning, Carmen and I are in the cafeteria, and she tells me, Milga I am going to leave, I'm going to be traveling, I didn't know then, but found out later on that she was going to be a missionary. And I'm not going to take the slot, at the school that they're going, you know for the community college. I'm not going to take that slot for the program, the College Discovery Program. So she said, Would you like to do it? So would you like to be part of that? So I said, of course I would. That's an opportunity to go to college. She marched me, Carmen and Milga, we marched to the counselor's office. And she actually said, I can't go, but I want her to go. And you know, and so, that's how I got into college.

[00:30:25]

I was very, I was very excited, because at my graduation, from high school, it was I think it was the B.A.M., Brooklyn Academy of Music. But my mother had always been very ill. She was an asthmatic, a severe asthmatic. And just about every other month she was in the hospital. But my father did go to my graduation. And with, my with an uncle, the uncle that he left me with in Puerto Rico, I found out later on the, Tio Angel, they both showed up at the graduation. And it was just, I don't know how this happened, but I was in the audience. I had heels on those white heels that we wore those days, little white heels on, but I was like, I think it was my first time wearing those heels, and I didn't really know how to walk in them. But all of a sudden, somebody from onstage called Milga Morales, like, why are they calling me? Well, they wanted the school to recognize, they wanted everyone to recognize that the school was actually doing something for students that particularly students of color, and students from other countries, etc. So this was a way to get that kind of recognition by bringing us up on stage. So even though it was a small thing, I got on stage and was recognized for the Standard Oil Company scholarship. And when I was on stage, they said, oh, and we also have a number of students that are going to college with the College Discovery Program. So that was another way, that the school was kind of taking credit for something that they didn't really, really do. Because some nobody spoke to me about college when I was, you know, at the high school. So it wasn't if it wasn't for a friend. So anyway, they actually called us on stage. I mean, sorry, they, I was already on the stage, and they called me up again, so I was called twice forward, to come forward. As a result of that my family thought that it was the greatest thing in the world. I was like, I could have won the Nobel Prize. I was like a Nobel Prize winner. My father had a friend in the audience who happened to be from my hometown of Guayanilla, and that friend went and told everybody in Guayanilla that I had gotten these fantastic awards, and it just kind of spread. And in a way, it really helped me because then I felt like oh, I could, you know, I could

win something, I could do something. And that was my my experience with getting into college. Getting into the first college that I went to was Queensboro Community College.

Pam Sporn

So it's interesting, you got this. Although the family, it was difficult for the family to make it possible to go to college, the school didn't really encourage you. But somehow you once you've got the ability your family was totally in support of it. So that was...so you ended up at a community college. Tell me about how you got from the community college to Brooklyn College.

Milga Morales Nadal

Okay. All right. So, the first thing we had to do when we got to the community college, Queens, Queensboro Community College, in this case, was attend a summer program, because we were in this special program College Discovery therefore those of us that were there, were thought of as folks that could do well in college, but hadn't really demonstrated that throughout, in terms of their academic records coming in so we were definitely being asked to take courses that, some of them, they could call them compensatory courses, but they were basically courses to help you, to help better prepare you. So we started the summer in that program. And it was, it was really, a very interesting summer, because the community college that we were in, hadn't quite been built yet. So it was on a golf course, in Queens and it was the top of the hill was where the main building was, the administration building today, you go there, it's beautiful, it's very different. But it was mostly all mud. And when it rained, many of us got stuck in the mud, like a, it was like a swamp walking up there to get there where I lived, I had to take two trains and how to take a bus. That's how much you wanted to go to college. At one point, I was going to sleep with my clothes on, so that the next day I would be able to get up in time, so I would make my eight o'clock classes, you know, when you're a new student at the college or a freshman, as they used to call them, you would have to always wind up but you always want to put the eight o'clock in the morning classes. So it was good times and bad times. The bad. The great part about it is that I met a cohort of, of young people like myself that were very excited about being in college, we were very diverse, my best friend at the time, and that became my best friend later on, was also Puerto Rican. And she was actually from East New York, and we became, you know, great buddies. So we would try to meet up all the time to get to walk up that, that hill that that muddy hill all the way up, to get to the administration building and then to go to our classes, which were held in temporary, pretty much temporary buildings. It was a real effort. I remember, two things that I'd probably just want to share really quickly is one, I had a friend named Rosalie and Rosalie, one day decided that she was going to walk on a board over this mud to go up the mountain, she felt the board didn't, didn't have, you know, she wouldn't get stuck in the mud. Well, my friend Rosalie fell into the mud,

we actually had to get help, too. It's like, it's like being in a swamp. And like in quicksand, it pulls you down. Nobody knew that we were going through these things. But my, when I would get home, my family who always had this quick sense of humor, you know, always made comments. My remember my brother, my older brother said, Milga, where do you, Where were you coming from? I thought you were going to college? I said, Yeah. So he said, but what do you come home with mud every day in your, on your in your shoes. And it's true, our shoes were always very muddy. So, you know, it was kind of a challenge for us. Because in addition to that, we had to deal with the academic, the academics at the at the college.

But it was also at a time when there was civil rights marches, Martin Luther King, we were all very, we all became engulfed and engaged in what was going on in the country. And that I think, was because my connection to my community, but also just being in the room in, in the classes with other young people. And it was more diverse this time. So you know, yes, a lot of White students, a lot of White students were, had been in already admitted in the college, not necessarily an our program. But then we had another group of students like, like ourselves, that were from different backgrounds. The first time that I got into the college, I remember like, I you know something, I want to join something here I want to join like a club or an organization. And I was looking around and didn't quite see what I would be interested, in people were doing things like tutoring kids in the neighborhood in Queens, so you would take another bus, and to go, and this was just volunteer, but there was a spirit of the times was like, folks were trying to help each other. So I wound up doing some of that, going to a church and working mostly with Latino and African American children just trying to help them learn to read these were second and third graders, for me was like so fulfilling. And I guess that's why I became very interested in education later on. But in addition to that, I wanted to be more active in doing things, I was very interested in, I grew up in marches with my mother and you know, and the rallies that she attended, and with the hospital workers. So I was very interested in and wanted to, to be more engaged. And I remember one day coming home and telling my mother, I want to do something in the school, but I don't know what, I don't know what group to be part of. I didn't want to be a cheerleader. And there was a lot of that stuff, too, going on sororities and fraternities and all of that, but that wasn't my interest. My mother said to me, you know, don't worry, you're gonna find something, you're gonna find something. Well, the next day I walk by, and it's kind of they call it a club hour, it was one of the rooms and I saw a bunch of people in there. And I kind of just put my ear here and I heard that they were talking about that they were gonna go to Washington, DC, and that was going to be a protest, and it was about civil rights and everything. And it just sounded like, yeah, that sounds like something I wanted to be part of. So I walked

in, and it happened to be the Congress and Racial Equality chapter. At Queensborough CORE, they called it and the minute I walked in, I sat down, and they were looking for a secretary. So it's so funny that you know, I left the secretary and wound up being the secretary that same day of the Congress of Racial Equality at my school. So that experience, I think, led to so many other experiences, which

[00:40:11]

basically connected back to the community again, because we all, those of us, especially in the program, were from all different communities in Brooklyn, like East New York, like Gowanus, like those communities. And we kind of like circled and it was kind of a circle of information, you know, things coming out of the community, going into the school, in the school, and then getting additional information from people that were already really involved in the Civil Rights struggles at that time. And of course, the war in Vietnam was something that we were becoming much more familiar with, my we were already what 18, 19, my brothers were already of draft age. So both of them were in a situation where either one of them could be drafted at any moment. So that certainly became something that became part of my struggle as well, coming from, from my family, having had two uncles who went to ,who were in Korea, and, you know, I think were drafted as well into Korea. And they came back and had a very difficult time when they came back. So going to war, and particularly this particular war, which we didn't quite understand what, what people were fighting for, was something that I was already developing a consciousness about. So I think all of those things together were really what made me more engaged and more active in school. And as I said before, I developed a friendship with a young Puerto Rican girl who's from East New York. So we got involved in the community in East New York, we wound up even getting trained as draft counselors, we basically, were just giving information to anybody who wanted to know that you had an option, you didn't really have to go. But you needed to know all of this, all of this information. And it was funny because my two, funny, in the funny not really funny, but it was interesting, because my two brothers were actually of draft age and so, that was that I was constantly something that I was thinking about. But, you know, they eventually wound up going, one of them going to Vietnam, and the other one being drafted during the Vietnam period, as well. And so our families were completely involved with all of this. This was we, you know, it was very hard in those days to say you weren't in part of something, because one, you were you were hooked into it one way or the other, you were just naturally part of being active. And I think that was the tenor of the times.

Oh, I'm in 1967, January 1967, I arrived at Brooklyn College, along with my friend who had, I had met at Queensborough and both of us were fairly intimidated by the college itself. We walked down the halls. With me there

is a very big, Brooklyn College is very big. And we were looking around, I guess we were trying to find a home or place under the sun at Brooklyn College. I mean, it took us a while, but we had done that at Queensboro. And we really couldn't find people to talk to that were kind of from our neighborhoods, even folks that were, I guess, you might say involved and engaged, we really couldn't find that until we arrived on the campus one day, and there was a rally going on. Very big demonstration going on, on the campus. And I was very excited. Oh my god, something's going on at this college. And, you know, clearly we were still involved with the civil rights of the anti war, anti war movement. And it was the day when the college, when the students at the college decided that they would go on strike.

And they were and I'm trying to remember what the strike was particularly for that day, but I know that they wanted to cancel classes. And I saw a professor get up and speak and his name is Bart Meyers. Professor Meyers was. I found out later on a very big activist, a professor of psychology at Brooklyn College. And so that was about the entree, you know, then I began to go okay, there's more to this college than meets the eye. I also saw a young man get up and I thought he might be Latino, you know, I'm not sure but he might be maybe Puerto Rican I don't know. And I kind of feel like the he was standing on a box. You know how people say that stand on a soapbox. I kind of feel like he was standing on something because it wasn't a regular podium. And he was facing,, we were we were sort of on the outside and we were just like looking at the campus looking at the quad, what they call the quad is the center of campus, and we were looking and admiring this young man who was up there talking. And you know, we liked him, what he was saying because he was definitely engaged in terms of civil rights. And also they were talking about the campus and how they wanted more students of color on the campus. So all of those things resonated with us. So the college for us was to, you know, at least two different places. One was the sort of the academic setting that seemed to us to be very sanitized.

[00:45:28]

And then we had sort of this mix of folks that were talking about different issues and different programs. The young man that was, that I think, I remember him on a soapbox and probably wasn't a real soapbox but I remember him standing up on something, turned out to be from a student group called the W.E.B Du Bois Club. And that was one of the most active student, student clubs on the campus. By way of introduction to the campus life at Brooklyn College, that was that was the first step. After that we became familiar with other groups on campus Students for a Democratic Society, B.L.A.C., which is a Brooklyn League of Afro American Collegians was already, also on campus. So we decided after a while that, a few of us would get together some of the some of us that

came from Queensborough, but also we started meeting some students on the campus. In fact, talking about language, we decided let's take a Spanish class, because in the Spanish class, we may actually meet people that come from Latin American countries, and maybe even Puerto Ricans. And we did, we met at least one student in that, in that Spanish class. His name was, his name is Felipe Pedraza, and Felipe and myself and Irma, is the other student, the one that came from Kingsborough, the three of us we started coming together and meeting in the school cafeteria.

And, you know, just kind of analyzing a little bit about what was going on in the campus. And what could we do and how could we get involved. We knew we wanted to be part of the bigger picture. But we also wanted to address issues of Puerto Rican culture and history. And the fact that in order to find out anything about Latin America, you basically had to take a course in Hispanic Studies or Spanish department at the college. And we thought that there was, at that point, much more information, much more literature, many more, much more history that we could, that could be included in the campus, in the campus, curriculum of the college. And we definitely wanted to start moving in that direction and though some of the conversations that we had in what was then called Whitehead cafeteria, it was just a place where we met alongside, the sororities and fraternities, they were very big around the campus at that time. In fact, all the houses around the campus, probably including, you know, these houses around the Brooklyn College neighborhood, that you still see standing now were houses where they did, where sororities and fraternities were meeting as well.

So yeah, so there was a mix at that point. And, as I said, the two worlds of Brooklyn College. So in terms of the demographics of the campus, what we perceived is that there were 1000s of students that were probably categorized as White. And then, in terms of numbers of Latinos, or students of color, we did not see or interact with very, with very many of those. And after a while, we realized that there were maybe on, they can be counted on maybe two hands. The numbers of students, definitely the numbers of Puerto Ricans. And then there was a maybe a few more of African American students on the campus. But that was the extent I think of the the people of color, demographics at Brooklyn College at the time, at least as you know, the way that we perceived it. At Brooklyn College, a few of us started getting together in January of '67, then in September of '67, and then January '68. During that period of time, there was a lot of activity going on in the college, related back to the issues of civil rights and the war in, the war in Vietnam. And also, across the country, people talking about ethnic studies. And it was something that we started talking about at Brooklyn College it was just a few of us. But the few of us that would get together in the cafeteria in, at Brooklyn College, we would talk about like, what about if we came together we created an organization.

What about if we, together put forward the things that we thought should be changed at the college, you know, what should be included? And we certainly were talking about the things that we were concerned about, we wanted to be a community, we wanted a connection to our community, we wanted the college to really be open to doing more service in the community. But we also wanted our history and our culture and our language to be taught in the college. So we had all of those, all of those concerns. And after a while, we became friends with students from other organizations, the W.E.B. Du Bois club, as I had mentioned previously, also the Brooklyn League of Afro-American collegians. Students for a Democratic Society, there was a number of student groups and some coalition student coalitions that were, students that weren't necessarily involved in any particular group but were very concerned about the issues and also wanted to take an active role in a very progressive way. And so we decided, one day that we would come together as an organization. And we did, and we didn't have a name. But one day before a rally that was going to be held on the campus during that time during those months, a student group, and I believe, I remember it to be the White student group on the campus, it was very progressive. They had made up a flyer, and they had actually talked to us the day before about getting involved this particular rally. And on the flyer they wrote, Puerto Rican Alliance, because we were allied to what they were doing. But that's the name. And that pretty much stuck. Some people say it was another group that that came up with the name. But that's how I, that's how I recall, recall it.

Pam Sporn

[00:51:46]

So then you were a founding member of the Puerto Rican Alliance? What was the what was the impetus behind this formation? What were the goals of the organization? What were the goals of the Puerto Rican Alliance?

Milga Morales Nadal

You know, that's a good question, because, well, the goals of the Puerto Rican Alliance were to introduce into the campus, the history and culture of Puerto Rico. And at that point in time, we didn't really have something concrete. And we didn't have the exact books that should be taught. We didn't know where do we get these teachers? We didn't have any of that information. So many of us, you know, were new to college, and our families didn't know anything about this. So we didn't know how to introduce these things. How do you, how do you make demands? And then really expect to get things from it if you don't know specifically what is it that you want? So generally speaking, we knew that history, culture in that included art, and music and all the things that we thought we, the college would be enriched by, you know, and it shouldn't just be for us, it should be in the curriculum for everybody, to everybody to learn. We saw that there was something called Area Studies, Urban Studies, and we go, hmm, that kind of touches upon it. I know I personally was approached by these, a professor in the Spanish language department, who heard that we

were developing something called the Puerto Rican Alliance, and that we had these goals. And that person actually came over to me, I remember that distinctly, that Professor came to me and said, you don't have to create something new. You already have a Hispanic club on the campus. And we would try to communicate to him No, it's not the same thing. We just don't consider ourselves Hispanic. We know that we are as Puerto Ricans, we are definitely products of at least three different groups that we can mention. We are, we're a product of the indigenous peoples, we are a product of the African peoples and of course, yes, we are Spanish also, we have Spanish heritage. But that's not the only thing. So we don't want to be only a part of the Hispanic society. And we do have, we know that Puerto Rico has so much, so much history and culture and language that we don't know about. So we want to do this not just for others to learn, but we want to learn, we want to take those classes too because we never had those classes before, we'd never had those classes in college. Elementary School, obviously not. So we decided that we would go forward with those goals. And it just it was in tandem with what the Brooklyn League of Afro-American students also wanted. They wanted at that point, and they had already, they were already they're calling for an Institute of Afro-American Studies at Brooklyn College. And we started thinking about that as well. So well, that sounds like, that's a way to make it something permanent.

Because what we're talking about now offering one course is not going to, they're not going to continue that we know that, as a matter of fact, because they heard the college apparently heard about the fact that we wanted these courses, they did introduce a Puerto Rican Studies class. And as a student at Brooklyn College, I registered for it. And I was kind of happy. Yeah. We got at least one course. Interestingly enough, the person that they put to teach, well, definitely wasn't Puerto Rican. And the first day that we went into class, gave us a lesson about her travels to Ecuador, which was very valuable and very important. However, that's not a Puerto Rican Studies class. So we knew even from that, they weren't getting it. You know that in order to have Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College, we not only needed to have the idea of it, but we needed to have resources, which meant that we had to bring some teachers in. And if we had to bring them from Puerto Rico, import them from Puerto Rico, and we needed to have the materials, we needed to have some books on the campus, we needed some, we needed things in the library that we could go to and we can use. I started thinking about what different activities we could have. And so one of the first things that we did, we, was an art exhibit at the college. And together, we got together with a friend, with friends at the college, some of those that transferred over with me from Queensborough Community College. And we set up in an art exhibit, we invited artists that were here in New York City from Puerto Rico but we're living in New York City. So they were coming in from Harlem, from East Harlem, and

they contributed their artwork, it was one of the first things that we did concretely because in a way we had to show the college, what it was that we wanted, because I don't think they had an idea.

Pam Sporn

[00:56:43]

So how did you continue to go about organizing this as students that you actually eventually had the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies? How did you, when you went from three students meeting in the cafeteria, what was your...

Milga Morales Nadal

We went from so, during this period of time, we grew, from three students to maybe 15,20, 25,30 students, and that all related to the Puerto Rican Studies, the goal for Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College, in May of 1968, the call went out that not only did we want more studies, ethnic studies at Brooklyn College, and clearly Puerto Rican Studies and Afro American Studies, but we also wanted more students of color, in the college. So along with asking for, demanding Puerto Rican Studies, and Brooklyn College, we also talked about bringing in 1000 Black and Puerto Rican students in the college, many of us walked around with a little sign that said, 1000, 1000, lots of folks didn't know what that meant. But that's, that was an effort to make sure that the college was changing along we would introduce new things, but we also wanted the college itself to change and to be more inclusive. And that's how we, that's one of the things that we organized around.

Pam Sporn

What kind of response did you, did the Puerto Rican Alliance get from the Brooklyn College campus, from the administration, from the faculty, from other students?

Milga Morales Nadal

Well, lot of us were not, lots of us at Brooklyn College were not familiar with the structure of the college, how things work administratively. But we knew there was something called the Faculty Council. And through our friends in the B.L.A.C., the Brooklyn League of Afro-American Collegians, it was it was related to us that we would have to go to Faculty Council, and we would have to make demands at that, at that Council of the faculty. We didn't know the faculty, you know, we knew that teachers were teaching us those faculty, but we didn't know any of these other folks that were in this, in this body called the Faculty Council. But a number of us did get together. And we went to the Faculty Council and along with with the B.L.A.C. students, Brooklyn League of Afro-American Collegians, we got up and we demanded an Institute of Puerto Rican Studies. At that point, the college was in, I would say in turmoil, and there was changes going on with the administration at the college. The faculty, lots of faculty were committed and involved and also supportive, not everyone, because even when we went to Faculty Council on that day,

within the Faculty Council, there were there were people that said, one comment that we got from a faculty member was, well, if you're going to have Afro-American Studies, and you're going to have Puerto Rican Studies, then why can't the American Indians be included too, which we thought, again, was very important, but we also saw it, for it, it's intention was really to distract, you know, and to then, from there, we would then say, well, then we don't need any of that, because we're already doing everything for everybody. So in other words, you're so inclusive that you really don't, don't include anybody new because you're already so inclusive. We took that to mean that there was definitely some attitudes against having these changes in the campus and we found out subsequently to that, that there were other Faculty Council meetings that took place where, in fact, people wanted to actually cancel out everything that happened at this faculty meeting, where in fact, they did approve Afro-American Studies, and Puerto Rican Studies, at least Institutes.

One of the things that that was interesting about the session where we demanded Puerto Rican, an African and African American studies is that they wanted to know whether or not it should be one, one unit, whether Afro-American Studies and Puerto Rican Studies should be one unit. And it was it was a moment of pause for us, because we had so many things in common with the African American students and what they were fighting for. But we also thought that things were very specific. So we actually left it with, we left that day, and we went, we thought about it. And we said, no, we want to have two separate Institute's because it will be more powerful if we have two separate Institute's we're coming in with two different powerful organizations, populated not only by some interested and committed faculty, but also by students that were committed and involved. And I think that's the best decision that we ever, that ever made.

Pam Sporn

So can you say the date that the Puerto Rican Studies Institute was established?

Milga Morales Nadal

Well, it was demanded and I guess you would say establish, I believe it was May 16, 1968. At the Faculty Council meeting, it took time before it was put together. And of course, you know, we needed resources. So we had to keep on coming back. With more demands for the funding for an Institute, we needed to put together a plan for the Institute, we needed to actually bring in someone new, because those people there did not have the background to set up an Institute like the one that we were expecting to have, because we wanted an Institute of Puerto Rican Studies that, that was committed to continuing work in the community, we wanted to make sure that it had the history and culture and also an opportunity for folks to do research. And there was also a very big interest in having bilingual studies at that point as well.

Pam Sporn So you were students proposing this? How did you? Were there other faculty members that joined forces with you? How did how did these 15 students at this point, end up having the school institute this official program?

Milga Morales Nadal When as outsiders, when you come to a school like Brooklyn College, you really don't know what's going on in the campus, you really don't know the people, right? You really don't know the stories, their backgrounds. We were pleasantly surprised at the college that even within the Faculty Council, where we did have some people that were not in favor of, of establishing ethnic studies, we call later on ethnic studies. There were some professors that were very supportive. And a few of them were African American professors and we did have a few, found out later on Latino professors as well. But on the day that, on that May 16 day 1968, there was a professor that had sat next to a little group, a little group of Puerto Rican students. And I don't remember his name right now but he was giving us a little orientation as we were sitting there, this when you ask for something say in this way, make sure that they, that they're making a commitment that you're not going to walk out of here, and they're just going to yes, you. So we did have support from some faculty and then later on, we brought in new faculty that that really were committed to Puerto Rican Studies.

Pam Sporn Was this demand for the Institute part of the 18 demands?

Milga Morales Nadal Yes, yes.

Pam Sporn Tell me about the 18 demands, what were the 18 demands that the Puerto Rican Alliance made?

Milga Morales Nadal [01:04:34]
So our demands included, we wanted to have a small school. Let me start again. We had several demands that we made as Puerto Rican students at Brooklyn College during that period of time, and we wanted them to be, these we wanted to bring in, to create an Institute that would allow us to carry out the things that we thought were most necessary for us and for our communities. One of the things that we wanted was an adult education program. Again, that's our connection to our community. We knew that there were many adults in our community that would love to get that time, they call them general equivalency diploma, a GED, we didn't have an opportunity for them. They didn't have many of those programs, that they could take and would be offered by the campus, by the college. So we asked for a GED program, adult education program. We also wanted to start children off, not the way we started, but start them off with an opportunity to learn their language, and that that should happen in early childhood. And so we asked for an early childhood center. So we started

the first Escuela Infantil Bilingue. And that was actually a school where the person that developed the curriculum for that, contributed greatly, her name is Dr. Sonia Nieto and she created a fantastic curriculum for the for the children, it was the most beautiful sight to go in there and see what we never had, we were able to get that demand as well. We also wanted to have an opportunity for our teachers to be able to teach in Spanish, that is the students that were in education at Brooklyn College, that they be trained to use the language in classroom with the kids, the children, that they were teaching, and for them to also better their language. So we wanted some courses to be taught where they would get instruction in their native language, because they probably didn't have the opportunity to learn it well, especially academic Spanish, but to also be able to go into the schools and use the language and converse with the students, at the same time have the history and culture. So we had several demands. And you know, clearly, we wanted more students of color in Brooklyn College, there was a list of 18 demands.

Pam Sporn

Okay. Was this the point when you said you were wearing the pins that said 1000? Was that when you went out and actually recruited students? Can you tell me about that?

Milga Morales Nadal

Yeah, a number of us actually did that. We went with during the period, for sure, for sure. So yeah, so during this period of time, also in the in those years, we were interested in bringing more students of color into Brooklyn College, but also we wanted them to be able to be supported, because not all of them could actually pay for their, even though it was a very small tuition, they would still have to pay, they would still have to buy books. So what we wanted was the SEEK program, the Search for Education and Knowledge program, which was very similar to the program that I, that I was in when I was in community college the program was called the College Discovery Program. But again, this is a program that helps students that were committed to getting a college education, that were making the effort to go to college, that were fairly well prepared, but needed maybe some more support, and it was a way to get getting them into Brooklyn College, but also to make them ,to help them succeed. Because one thing is to come in, and we see the revolving door people, you know, they're one, folks, they're one semester and then out the next semester. So we wanted to avoid that. And so we want to 1000 students to come in but supported through the SEEK program, what we wound up doing is getting lots of applications, that we actually took ourselves to various high schools. And we went to the high schools, and we asked to be allowed into the high school so that we could talk to students that were there and encourage them to apply, not for four years from themn from then from them, but right now that they could go in September of that year. I know I personally went with my buddy Irma, who had met in Queensborough Community College. And I found again

learning new, we learned something new every day that you just couldn't walk into a high school and get, and do that. But we just we had a friend who knew the head of the Department of Education, they called it the Board of Education at that time, and made a phone call to the head of the Board of Education. The Board of Education happened to be Puerto Rican at that time. And, and was very supportive, and gave us, gave the school the okay to have us come in for this wonderful thing that we were doing, and to actually speak directly to students. Now a number of us did this in the Puerto Rican Alliance. And this was all volunteer. Nobody knew that, none of us were getting paid or anything for this. But we were so committed to making these changes in the school. And this is one of the changes that had to be made. We had to make sure that the school was more inclusive.

Pam Sporn So what happened?

Milga Morales Nadal So that year, I personally I was able to witness students who had completed their applications and in September, there was, this gym, were you use to register for classes and so all of us were able to kind of see each other in the gym. And I personally was able to see students that came from that high school, I had actually registered, and we got into the SEEK program. So there was definitely a shift in the number of students, we were able to get numbers of students, I think the number is 800. I am not exactly, sure. But yes, definitely made a difference.

Oh, it was it was wonderful. It was wonderful because for me, witnessing the changes, not, during, during this period, we were witnessing changes that were going on in the country, or going on in the world. With the war. With the civil rights, voting rights, bilingual ballot, there was so many changes going on, and to be able to be in a place where you could actually see it upfront, not just reading the newspaper, to see the changes were happening in front of us over really, maybe two years which was a relatively short period of time. It was, it was an incredible feeling in a very empowering feeling for, for all of us, I think.

Pam Sporn [01:11:25]
So things kept developing on the campus. Tell me about what happened when Black, Puerto Rican and White students occupied President Pecks office on May 1 of 1969. What was that about?

Milga Morales Nadal So the college was about, so in 1969, we were still looking to make sure that the college was being as inclusive as possible, and bringing in more students of color. We also wanted to make sure that tuition was not being raised. So we were concerned about that. We were concerned that they were bringing police on campus. And we were concerned that students that were activists were going to be punished for being activists on the, on

the campus. So there was a number of, a number of concerns that we had some, some of us actually took over the office, took over the President's office. I did not, I was not inside the office, my best friend Irma was. But we were outside and we were the support that, that night and we stayed overnight, actually, they closed the gates of the campus. And my family didn't know where I was, they wanted to, they were looking for me. And at that time, there wasn't really cell phone so we couldn't use the cell phone to connect. But I remember very clearly it was one of the last times that I saw my mother, very active after that, she passed away. But she came to the doors of the doors, the gate, she came to the gate of Brooklyn College, to one of the side gates, and started asking people if they knew where I was. And of course, the students were there, were all students that had been active. So we pretty much knew each other. And they knew where I was. And I went to the gate, where I saw her, she was on the other side of the gate and she had she had for me coffee in a thermos. So it was a wonderful example of how your family sometimes are not always in agreement of everything you do. But when they see you're totally committed to something, they're very supportive and I was lucky in that way.

The office of the president clearly was this for us at the college, reflected power, and taking over an office and even supporting the students that were doing that and some faculty as well, was definitely empowering for all of us. Not only, not only those of us who are students in the school, but for our communities. This was happening not just at Brooklyn College, that was happening at other colleges to throughout this, the CUNY system, as well as throughout the country. So we weren't alone. And clearly, some of us had gone to workshops and retreats where we learned about how to do these kinds of things. But we didn't know everything. So one of the things that we wanted to make sure is that, that the students that were inside the President's office, were not penalized, for that. Because it was for a good cause. I mean, it was really this is, this was not to hurt the institution in any way. This is to make the institution better. And that's how we that's how we all saw it. And the fact that we supported the takeover of a President's office at that time, because it was the way to get the attention of the campus, get the attention of the community, get national attention as well. And we were in sync pretty much with other progressive groups on throughout the country that were doing.

I would say that most of us would not use the term that we were scared. We, those of us that were in support of the President's takeover, and the people that were inside the President's office were pretty clear on their goals. And we were all clear that we wanted change. And some of us maybe had a different emphasis on the kind of change that we wanted. But we were all clear on that. And I didn't, I didn't feel like there was a sense of fear amongst the students, and the community that supported us. Maybe

that's why because we knew that we, we came from supportive communities. And we weren't doing this alone.

Pam Sporn So were there reprisals against the students who, who took over the President's office and were making these demands for change?

Milga Morales Nadal Yes, the police came in at a certain time of the night and arrested the students. And the next day, we all came back and had a rally and collected money and were supportive to make sure that the students if they had to, there was bail necessary, that we would all be in support.

Pam Sporn Were these the BC 19? Or was that something else?

Milga Morales Nadal That's something else? That comes later.

Pam Sporn [01:16:38]
So what did you, what did you win from the takeover of the President's office?

Milga Morales Nadal The wins, Let me start again. The victories that we can talk about. And it was not just about taking over President's office, but I think it was a, that was a culmination. It was the ongoing work that folks were doing every day, including the rallies and working with the community and engaging more people every day, getting those non-committal students to be committed. All of that work, I think resulted in I believe, resulted in our Institute's of Puerto Rican Studies, which we still have today. In fact, now we have departments, resulted in changing the face of the campus, in the numbers of students of color coming into the campus and other students, poor White students as well, that would not normally have been able to come in under the regular requirements. It also, it also created a sense of that Brooklyn College could be a place where you could contribute to changing it. You know, where folks, yes, it's okay, you could do that. We got that sense that we were doing the right thing. And a lot of people agreed with us.

Pam Sporn How, what was the connection between this demand for ethnic studies, Puerto Rican Studies and Black Studies at Brooklyn College, and the CUNY wide struggle for open admissions? Can you make some connections?

Milga Morales Nadal Yeah. Well, at Brooklyn College, when we first got to the college, we wanted to make sure that we were making a change right away and the change there was, that was important to us, was to make the college more inclusive. And that actually was happening at the other campuses as well, because CUNY was a what they used to call it though working persons college. It's where you went, if you were a really good student, but didn't

have a lot of money to go to one of the private colleges or if you are a person of a particular background, and you were excluded, and some places in the country you were still excluded from, from particular colleges. So you went to CUNY, but that made CUNY mostly an all White institution. And so at the different campuses, City College, Hunter College, similar movements were taking place. And those of us that were learning, we were learning from each other, but we also are learning from Columbia University and from other places where similar struggles were taking taking place.

Tami Gold

This is the time when the Young Lords were active, right? Did you see yourself as militant with the parades and the marching...

Milga Morales Nadal [01:19:45]

So this is the time when we when we also experienced seeing very militant students, and not students also, just folks from the community, for example, the Young Lords of Party. We knew that the Young Lords organization was created in Chicago. But then we had a burgeoning Young Lords Group here in New York City. I myself attended a class at Brooklyn College and at, in the class, it was an education course. And they were looking for our students to have an experience in New York City that they wouldn't normally have. And I volunteered to go up to East Harlem with the class and actually be the kind of guide. So we wound up going to the offices of the Young Lords in East Harlem. And that was very, we were, I think, very impacted by that experience. Because we were all very excited about, you know, the Young Lords, we thought, like, wow, they're really doing, they're really doing, they're really committed, they're really in the streets, they're, you know, burning garbage in the streets and serving breakfast. And that's the kind of stuff that we really think is really, really important to do, in addition to getting our ethnic studies programs. And I remember going to the Young Lords office in East Harlem, and, really seeing some interesting things. One of the things that we saw, and this was with a class of students that never had even been to East Harlem at all, was young men experienced, there was a young man apparently had been found taking bread from a from a deli. And rather than call the police, the Young Lords actually stepped out and basically shamed the young man in the community. And so what we were looking at was the sense of, wow, this is like a different kinds of justice system that's going on. So we were exposed through the Young Lords and through the more militant organizations like the movement, pro independence for Puerto Rico, we were exposed to different tactics and different strategies that organizations were using. And some of those things we were actually we were also able to use Brooklyn College.

Pam Sporn

So at this point you had the Puerto Rican Studies Institute, what were the changes in the curriculum at this point, once you won this victory? What were the concrete changes in courses that were offered?

Milga Morales Nadal

We the so when we got the Puerto Rican Studies Institute at Brooklyn College, the first thing that we did was bring in someone that could actually organize an Institute, because we didn't really know exactly what to do or how to organize it. We did have some students that attend to conferences in other parts of the country. And we're coming back with information about how to how to put together an Institute of, an Institute of ethnic studies. So Dr. Josephine Nieves, was our first director of the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College. And she came out of the experience also of ASPIRA, and under the leadership of Dr. Antonia Pantoja, which maybe many folks will recognize as a great leader in our community, especially when it came to education. We were building on what are what are these the experiences and the expertise of our community. And Josephine was able to do that. And she knew she didn't have all the experience of putting together courses. So she also brought in other professors, Professor Carmen Dinos to build a program of bilingual studies. And then Professor Sonia Nieto to help to develop that curriculum, and also to head up a school for the for our early childhood, Escuelita Infantil Bilingue. Professor Herminio Vargas. These were folks that were teaching in other schools in the city, and both Professor Vargas and Dr. Sonia Nieto were teaching in the schools in East Harlem, working with Luis Fuentes who was the first Puerto Rican principal in New York City. And this is the kinds of people that we actually got to come in and help us to develop courses.

And so yes, of course, we had to develop a course on the history of Puerto Rico. We had to develop a course on the culture, including the music of Puerto Rico, which became like probably one of the most popular courses, and that were taught at Brooklyn College. But we also developed an educational program, a bilingual educational program. So we had a series of courses where students were able to take materials from Puerto Rico, and from New York City and develop even newer, newer materials and put them into the curriculum so that they could then use them in the classroom in the elementary schools, as they, as they were teaching our younger kids coming in.

Pam Sporn

[01:25:10]

Who was taking the courses? How many students began to enroll? Were they all Puerto Rican students, were there Black students were there White students who was who? Who registered for these courses?

Milga Morales Nadal

You know, that's that. So in terms of registering for the courses, we had many students from different backgrounds registered with courses, but at

that time, there was quite, quite a number of Puerto Rican students. And as the Puerto Rican Alliance, one of the things that we would do is actually go and recruit the students on the campus with flyers and say, please register, please take this class, please try it. And because they made a connection with another person, and they said, oh, we are you taking the class to say, yeah, we're taking, I'm taking the class, we're taking the classes. So they would, they would register for the for the classes. But then we had other students that were not Puerto Rican, not Latino students, African American students, we had students from Panama, we had students from the Dominican Republic. And they all became excited and interested about Puerto Rican Studies. I have a friend who is Panamanian, and she took those courses very early on. And she, I remember her telling me Milga, I go home and my mother says to me, remember, you're not Puerto Rican, you're Panamanian. But she loved the classes so much. And through taking those classes, she learned more about her own Panamanian heritage and culture, because that certainly wasn't being taught in the schools.

We as a, we, as Puerto Rican people, are also a very oral society. And I think very early on, many of us did not go actually to schools, you know, because we didn't have access in Puerto Rico has always been very, very poor economically. So a lot of what we learned, we learn through stories. And a lot of those stories were music, were told through the music. And we, we knew we played instruments. The maracas, and guitarra, all of these instruments that are, instruments that remind us every day of our Puerto Rican history and culture, was a way for us to make a connection back to Puerto Rico. And I think that's what the students, why the students would take the class, because they somewhere somehow heard about this, they may not have heard about, you know, how many provinces there are in Puerto Rico, how many districts in Puerto Rico, but they did hear the but the music, and that there was, it was just a course that everybody wanted, wanted to take. In that course, they were able to make connections, not just the contemporary music of the time, which at that time, would have been mambo, cha-cha, all of those kinds of things, but even go back further, and learn about the danzas and the plenas, the bombas. And through that they would learn the culture. And so it was, it was a very exciting and interesting way. And, you know, till today we see that, you know, we see that the music for us is just incredibly important.

Tami Gold

What were some of the words?

Milga Morales Nadal Oh, God. So, you know, it's interesting, because you were talking about the different songs I'm thinking now about children's songs, [sings song in Spanish] probably not exactly those words. But those were those are the kinds of things that they will talk about in the course, and people would remember. But we also learned, of course, the Puerto Rican national

anthem, and we learned that there was a different version of the Puerto Rican national anthem, which we didn't know is a revolutionary version. So so much it was so rich was very, very rich.

Pam Sporn

[01:29:11]

At what point did you feel it was necessary to demand departments rather than just Institutes tell me about that.

Milga Morales Nadal So we early on in, in terms of the Puerto Rican Studies Institute, we early on realized that every year we would have to ask for funding for the Institute. And it became clear to us, particularly through the experiences of our Director, who had worked with ASPIRA and with other groups, it became very clear to us that we would have to ask for something more permanent. And the more permanent organization at Brooklyn College is called a department. A department is a place where you would have tenured professors, not, folks that would have to be hired every, year, or what we call adjuncts coming in as part timers, these would be, these would be professors that will, would be with us full time, we knew that we needed something where we could go to a professor and that professor would be there, like the following week, and the following year, you know, and not someone that was just coming here for maybe six months, and then had to leave right away. So how do we do that, the only way that we can do that is by having a department that actually needed at least five professors to be tenured in it. And that would take a long time. But we were willing to make that commitment, because we knew we wanted to institutionalize the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies, and the only way that we can institutionalize it would be as a Department of Puerto Rican Studies.

Pam Sporn

Was it 123, did they say ok now we have a department or...

Milga Morales Nadal Yeah. So you know, we wanted a Department of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College because we wanted to institutionalize the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies, there were a number of different ways to do that with strategies. And clearly, there was a strategy of dealing with the administration, and telling them, this is what we want. And so the Director of the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies, being a Director at the college had influenced and could do that. But politically, everyone would want to be a Departments other folks wanted to be Departments in Brooklyn College. So we needed to make sure that they understood why, we needed a department. So we needed to actually say, develop a rationale and a mission for the Department, which we had to basically sell to the rest of the campus. And as you know, very being very consistent we wanted a department where there was research was being done, where there would be curriculum would be taught in would be a focus on, our experiences, and particularly Puerto Rican experience. And where we would have a

commitment to the community, continued commitment to service in the community.

So we had to actually sell that mission at the college. We did have, we did get a lot of support from the Department of Africana Studies at that time, they were called Africana Studies. And we got commitment from other progressive faculty as well that supported the Department. But we also made sure that we in the Department itself, created something called a steering committee. And so as part of that steering committee, we made sure to include students, we made sure to include faculty and even community members and faculty from other departments of the college. So there was a strategy that we use, because we knew that they weren't just going to say, oh, sure, you can have a department tomorrow, that wasn't going to happen, it would take a lot. And subsequently, we found how much it would take, because at one point, we wanted to elect a chair for the Department of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College. And basically, we had a search committee, and the search committee was made of people from the Department. I'm sorry, two people from the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies...

Milga Morales Nadal So, at one point. In order to get a Department of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College, one of the strategies that we used was to make sure that we had a steering committee made up of students, faculty, staff, and even community members. Together, we worked to start talking about who would chair the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies, once it becomes a department. And we through, with the College of working with the college and the administration, we came up with a search committee and the search committee included not just people from the department. I'm sorry, again, from the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies, the search committee included people from the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies, and it included people from the from the college itself. Those everybody worked together and came up with some candidates that would be very qualified to run our Department of Puerto Rican Studies. The candidate that the steering committee in the Department of Puerto Rican Studies agreed upon was María Sánchez.

[01:34:36]

María Sánchez was an elementary school supervisor, many, many years in education. Also very, very committed to the study of Puerto Rican Studies itself and culture and history. And very knowledgeable. There was another candidate that interviewed for the position who had come from Puerto Rico, and that candidate had really no knowledge of the Puerto Rican diaspora, had no idea of, you know what was going on here in terms of our struggles, and how we got to where we were, where we could actually grow into a Department of Puerto Rican Studies.

It was determined by the college that they would not recognize that we were in support of María Sánchez, and that they would, that they wanted, that they made a decision that Elba Lugo, who was the candidate that the administration definitely said that they wanted, would be put into place, she would be the next chair of the department.

As a result of that, we definitely decided, nope, this is time that we have to take a position. Because if we're going to be a department, and we're going to have an autonomy, as a Department at the college, then we also have to be able to elect the person that's going to lead that department. And for that, many of us decided that it wasn't going to happen unless we did a number of things, including going back to our rallies and marches, and demonstrations, and working with the allies that we, that we could find on the on the campus and off campus.

Pam Sporn So what year was this and were you still a student?

Milga Morales Nadal At that time, I had just,, so in the in the year that the department was I'm sorry. In the year that the Institute was, was to be made a Department that we were struggling for the Department to be created from the Institute. In that year, I was already a counselor at Brooklyn College. And as a counselor it was very exciting for me because I was able to work with students, bringing them in and providing orientation and making sure that they felt comfortable at Brooklyn College and not intimidated, like when I had entered the college. So I was doing my work as counselor. But we also had a Latino Faculty and Staff organization. And that organization, I was a member of and through that organization continued to do my political work on the campus.

Pam Sporn Okay, so you were able to win the Department.

Milga Morales Nadal Right, we were able to get a Department of Puerto Rican Studies, and we decided that we should keep the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies because the Institute would allow us to do work that the Department would normally not be doing. The night that the BC 44 were arrested at Brooklyn College, in the struggle to bring María Sánchez in as the chair of the Department of Puerto Rican Studies, I, during that time, I was pregnant, nine months with my daughter, her name is Lenina. So you will know that she's since become also very active in various struggles. I was outside and actually saw everyone being brought in, to the what they call the paddy wagon and being arrested that evening, including my husband as well.
[transition]

Milga Morales Nadal Where they learn more about who they are, and how much they don't know about their culture and their history. So even if they're from another country, it actually impacts them in a way that they want to learn more,

and they go out and they study. And so it's, it's a Department that is not only academic, but it educates. It truly educates in a reflective way, in a very Freirian in the sense that in the Department, you're not just asked to write papers, and to do assignments, but you're asked to get involved and to get engaged. And not just in the course itself. But outside of the Department as well. There's an expectation that you're going to follow the mission of the Department, which is yes, you're going to do your research, you're going to be professional in your career but you're also going to be committed to your community. And we have from the ASPIRA logo, an expression that ASPIRA uses a triple A process, awareness, analysis and action. And I think that that definitely has been something that has guided us those three words have guided us in the Department. And till today, everyone and anyone who has taken courses in the Department, I feel they have something positive to say about it. Sometimes they don't even get the best grades but they're excited about having gone through the courses, about the friends that they've met, about how much it means to their families when they come back knowing more and more about their history and their culture. So for us, it's, it's a great, it truly is a great asset and it's a great victory that we till today have a Department of Puerto Rican Studies when in some cases in some areas of the college, some colleges, it doesn't exist in the same way that it used to.

Pam Sporn

[01:40:07]

So we began this conversation with you telling me about your early childhood experience and coming to college. You've had quite a career at Brooklyn College. Can you, what's been the, the impact on you, personally, in terms of your early activism and where did you, where did it take you in your career at Brooklyn College.

Milga Morales Nadal

So I believe that my career Brooklyn College is pretty much of a circle. I started off not knowing a lot about who I was, even though I did get support for learning of who I was, but definitely the college was not there with that information, what I needed the history and the culture. So I went forward, I, with many others struggled, and we made some changes in the college. I've tried to stay consistent with that, in whatever position I've had. And I've been at the college for many, many years. And I've just recently retired. But I've tried to stay consistent with trying to make an impact wherever I was. So when I did my counseling work at Brooklyn College, and that's how I started, as a professional at the college, I continued to work with students, so that they would create organizations, we had the Puerto Rican Alliance. From that we grew into something called the Latin Women's group, we had many different organizations, a Student Union for Bilingual Education, all of those organizations came in and I was directly involved with the creation of those, coming through then, becoming a faculty member of the college, I went and got a degree at another university, I got my doctorate in developmental psychology, I

came back and taught in the School of Education, in the bilingual program in the School of Education. So I was able to work again with our students and making sure that they were cognizant of the Department of Puerto Rican Studies, what it offered, and what it offered our community and to make sure that the students that graduated from that program, you know, were very conscious of that and we continue to fight for it, and we always talked about, you've got to continue to fight, you know, we got to maintain this, then going on to working as, in the administration of the college, which was very challenging. Becoming a Dean in the in the college also gave me an opportunity to do things that maybe I couldn't do as a professor. And I would be able to sponsor conferences, where we brought in people from Puerto Rico, but also from other places, you know, in the United States and beyond and talked about what are the themes that we think are important.

So as a Dean, I was able to create many different opportunities for students to also learn extra, in an extra curricular way things about the Department of Puerto Rican Studies, but also things that would be helpful for them as young people. We wanted to recognize students who made a difference. And basically, we were looking for students that were making progressive change, and that were taking action in their communities. So being in the administration, I was able to actually promote programs that focused on that and those programs are still they're still there today. And finally becoming Vice President at the college for Student Affairs, that gave me a more global picture of what's going on with students in the campus. And again, facing many challenges, but learning a lot. So my learning has not stopped, from the very beginning as we talked about earlier, as I talked about earlier, till now, I am still learning. And I guess, I will continue to learn.

Pam Sporn

Last question. How does the formation of APREE connect to this moment that you arrived at Brooklyn College campus in the early in the late 1960s, as a student.

Milga Morales Nadal

APREE begins to be formed, APREE, the Alliance and Puerto Rican Education and Empowerment begins to be formed by a number of us that were actually there in the '60s together, really the founders of APREE, and we felt like yes, some of us are going to be retiring. But we're not going to be retiring from our commitment to continue to do the work that we've been doing to continue to struggle. So APREE would give us an opportunity to support the Department of Puerto Rican Latino Studies, other progressive departments that are doing similar work, and as outsiders then from the college, we would be able to advocate and then be able to do things that sometimes you can't do from within, we can do from without.

In the late 60s, we read many reports that had been written about Puerto Rican students in the schools. And we saw that they were not doing as well as students that were considered students, the majority, which were mostly the White students in the schools, and we had a lot of concerns. And a lot of the things that we did to, that we created were as a result of also being very familiar with those reports. Till today, we find that we have lesser number of students in the schools that are Puerto Rican. But many of them are facing the same trials and tribulations that were faced by the young Puerto Rican children of the '50s and '60s.

Pam Sporn

[01:45:52]

Does this situation add to your commitment to with a feeling that there's, there's still such a need for the Department of Puerto Rican Studies and an organization like APREE.

Milga Morales Nadal

The populations of Latino students have changed in CUNY and in the school system, so that you don't have as many Puerto Rican students, but the need for a department that has a vision and a mission, like the Department of Puerto Rican Studies, has not changed. because it not only supports and services, Puerto Rican students, but it services students from all different backgrounds, and with its commitment to community, its commitment to service, its commitment to committed research, and its commitment to an inclusive curriculum. That is something that all students benefit from.

Tami Gold

Did that influence your struggle at all? The independence movement.

Milga Morales Nadal

My father was a sympathizer of the Nationalist Party. And so I grew up always understanding that there was a colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. And I believed at that time, and still believe that a lot of the problems that the island of Puerto Rico is suffering and has suffered through so many years, the exploitation, the exploitation of its resources, the situation that we have, where Puerto Rico is still the poorest of the territories, or the states, all of those things have an, have had an influence on my work, I can never leave that part out. So of course, I also became very active during my college years as well, with the movement pro independence, which then eventually became the Puerto Rican well, this particular movement, pro independence, we call it the MPI, which eventually became the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and I became a member of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and actively worked in various communities here in Brooklyn, in Sunset Park in Williamsburg. I also became a staff writer for the main organ of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, which was a newspaper called Claridad, and learned a lot more Spanish, because I had to write in Spanish, I always had these great opportunities not only putting together an article in terms politically you know, what was going to be said and the facts for a particular article but

also actually having to use my, my Spanish as well. And so till this day I, we stay committed and the Alliance for Puerto Rican Education and Empowerment, also recognizes that we cannot talk about just a diaspora we have to talk about the island because the fact that the diaspora is here is because of what's going on in the island and the colonial relationship with Puerto Rico.

Tami Gold

So, are you sad when you think about the devastation there now, because it makes me very sad. All these years of struggling and how Puerto Rican, Puerto Rico the island hurts so bad.

Milga Morales Nadal [01:49:23]

We recently had a devastation on the island with major, a major storm and we know all about that. But one thing that I realized is how much people here are connected to the island. You know, I'm so proud when I see our young people that they know how to dance, they know how to, you know, they keep the language and we were told when I was getting my doctorate, I was told by the third generation everybody would lose Spanish, and that's not the case. So our communities are staying connected when the devastation of the storm happened in Puerto Rico. Maria happens in Puerto Rico and Irma. We all here, definitely organized and supported Puerto Rico. We were extremely happy to see that in the when, when we heard about the corruption that we knew had been going on for a long time, but became very clear with the arrest of significant figures in the Puerto Rican government for having taken funds, particularly federal funds and to be used for themselves. When we heard that they, in fact, were going to be ousted from the government and the people were very upset about that isxn Puerto Rico, I happened to be a few days there during that time, especially when the Secretary of Education in Puerto Rico, Kelleher was ousted for being part of this whole corruption, we were particularly glad because we had seen what she had done during the storm and after, where they closed up so many schools in Puerto Rico, schools that the community needed, that were not just a source of education in the community, but a source of people meeting, and families getting together, you know, it was, it was the hope of the community. And so we were actually felt good that this person was found out and discovered and, ousted. But however, you know, we were wondering what else was going to happen on the island, and subsequently, we find out that there's a social media, as actually given us an opportunity to organize for against colonization, and for the people of Puerto Rico, because through the social media, we find out that a number of folks, especially the governor of Puerto Rico, were actually making comments, negative comments, not only about the Puerto Rican people that were lost in the, in the storm, as a result of the storm, the 1400 people that were not counted originally and that died in the storm, was making fun of them and making fun of people just because of their bodies and their, you know, what they looked like,

and that made a big impact on Puerto Rican people, because it was such a, it was just such disrespect. And I and we feel that they, many people in Puerto Rico, they were not that had been like, sort of sitting in the background for a while, got clearly more interested than ever before and it touched them. It touched them in ways that other things had not touched them. And so we see the Puerto Rican people raise up, rise up and it's continuing. So we're moving forward and when we're addressing not only the issues of the economy, but we're also addressing the issues of colonization as well.

[End of recorded material at 01:52:50]