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Interview with Carlos “Alejandro” Alejandro
Interviewed by Pam Sporn and Tami Gold

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Carlos Alejandro As I was driving from my home here, took me about an hour. And in that hour, I was revisiting the emotions and the images of things that I experienced at Brooklyn College. There was a lot of joy, but there was a lot of suffering as well, a lot of sacrifice that took place. So as I got closer and closer to Brooklyn College, I felt myself, tearful, I felt anxiety. And I was kind of struck by my awareness that so many years have gone by and that during those years I maintain the insights and the wisdom and understanding that I gained at Brooklyn College throughout my life.

The way in which we sought unity irrespective of people's religion, culture, ethnicity and race. There was a social justice struggle, we would say Blacks and Puerto Ricans at that particular time, but it also included Jews, it included Muslims it also included Whites who were joining us, because they saw that it was a just struggle. That principle that everyone has the right to sit at the table, carried me throughout my whole life. In my work in corrections, I've worked at Rikers Island where inmates had different kinds of conflicts and I was brought in really because I was able to deal with White inmates, Black inmates, Latino inmates and Asian inmates. And I attribute it to my experience at Brooklyn College.

We worked with different ethnic groups in a very intentional way. We spoke of the Third World Federation's, we talked about multi-cultural or multi-ethnic multi-national groups and associations, so the spirit that we had at Brooklyn College that was formed here was one that would look

beyond a person's ethnicity, race and we will see brothers and sisters in one another. It's a stark difference from what we see now, taking place in this country. We intentionally broke walls down. We didn't build them up in Brooklyn College. We were tearing them down and we did it intentionally and we did it unapologetically.

Pam Sporn You say it's different from now. In what respect?

Carlos Alejandro Well, now you see in the country that there's these divisions. You see the Trump and you see the Trump supporters. Basically flaming, inflaming racial tensions in this country. Three months ago, a White man on a train was picking on a Mexican and the Mexican would not speak to him. And then he looked at me and he said, "well, you're probably from the same country", as I was, he pointed to me and then he told me to go back to where I come from, he said "why don't you go back to where you come from?" he said to me, and based on the spirit of Brooklyn College I say, well, this is the response. I said, "Why don't you go back to where you come from?" That was my response. My ancestors were here before Columbus even arrived. You see what I'm saying? Before Columbus arrived, we were here. So we are the ones who actually uniquely qualify to tell someone to "go back to where you come from". The Europeans and the ones who came in and invaded and then created so much pain and suffering in this part of the world that we are continuing to feel now, at this time in this day.

Pam Sporn So let's revisit that period at Brooklyn College that was so meaningful for your life and brought so much emotion back, I want to hear about the power of it and the sacrifice and the whole story from your perspective.

So, tell me when you arrived at Brooklyn College, but first if you could tell me a little bit about your family background where you grew up when your family came from Puerto Rico and what neighborhood you lived in.

Carlos Alejandro My family immigrated in the 1950s, the early 1950s from Puerto Rico. I like to say that I was born and raised in the "ghetto," in the projects. And there's something about owning and claiming to come from the projects, well every time I say it reminds me that I overcame. That I was able to persevere that there was a resiliency that's established when one suffers poverty and oppression. So in my coming to Brooklyn College, I came to a college where I knew the Black and Puerto Rican community was involved in struggle. Many people who went to Brooklyn College, went to Brooklyn College because we went to learn and get an education, but also to contribute to the struggle of the Puerto Rican and the Black community inside of New York City. So we came in intentionally.

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I came from Stuyvesant High School, where I was maybe one of three Puerto Rican students in the whole school, and then maybe 5, 10 African Americans in the school. We ran in coming from the projects going to Stuyvesant High School at the age of 14, thereabouts I ran into a wall of racism, and it forced us to kind of make meaning, how do we understand, how am I to understand what's going on? So we became politicized. The term was to become politicized, or to use Paulo Freire "concientización", we were made conscious of what was happening, why we were poor, why some of us did not have enough to eat on a daily basis, or we were wearing hand me downs because there was not enough to go around. The ability to analyze began in Stuyvesant High School and going to Brooklyn College, I had entered already with that understanding that there is oppression, that there is class differences, that there is racism that's embedded in the society. And when entering Brooklyn College, I found many people who were feeling the same way. The beauty and the power of it, is that crossed racial, ethnic and religious lines. That's the beauty. I would add to that gender, age, that there were persons who, you know, older persons involved in the struggle as well as younger persons. I remember a woman, Doña Beatriz, who was working on her bachelor's, she had a heart condition and she was in her mid 70s. And she would join us in the protest around the right to select the chairperson in Puerto Rican Studies, what we would call at the time, the right to self determination. She would march and then she would get winded, and then we would have to sit her down, make sure that we took care of her. So this struggle in Brooklyn College was just not young students who were struggling, it was led by young students, but there were different age groups that were involved in it, and there was also the community because in some of the photos that I brought in, all of those people included members of the community, persons who were outraged at some of the attacks that we were facing at Brooklyn College at the time.

Pam Sporn

To step back to your time in high school when you became politicized, what do you attribute that to in addition to being one of the very few Puerto Rican students?

Carlos Alejandro

There was a music concert at Stuyvesant High School one evening, and the few Puerto Rican and Black students, we decided that we would do African drumming, Afro Cuban drumming. And there were African American, young women who were the dancers. During the break at night, we sat across Stuyvesant high school across the street talking. And as we're sitting there, a group of white men came by and they say, "your fucking animals, you belong in the zoo. All niggers belong in the zoo." Right, Stuyvesant high school, during the break, intermission and you had all of these White liberals, middle class because Stuyvesant was middle class, so we had all of them outside, watching us fight off a group of

racists. Young people, we were 14/15 years old having to fight only because of the color of our skin and because we were celebrating our culture. A plus thing, a positive thing that came out of this is that the White liberals were not passive and they took a stand and they supported us, and again, they did this with courage and they denounced what had happened in the community. So in entering Brooklyn College, I went to Brooklyn College at 17.

So when I went to Brooklyn College, I was already "concientizado", I was already aware that there were things that were not right. Brooklyn College gave us, gave me and others, a context in which we could fight for our community.

Pam Sporn

What had you heard about the struggle that happened at Brooklyn College before you got there? Because the earlier interviews we did, there was no Puerto Rican Institute, there was no Puerto Rican Alliance when those earlier students got there and they struggled to create that. So what did you hear about what this movement was about at Brooklyn College?

Carlos Alejandro

[00:09:27]

What I had heard, we had heard of the Brooklyn College 19, the BC19. We would say these are some badass people. They were arrested at night. Many of them because they were activists in Brooklyn College. So what they did for me, I'll speak just personally, what they did for me is that they filled me with pride and with courage. They said, "coño!" Like our community has the courage. We have the courage to stand up. In Puerto Rico recently when people protest that the governor there was a slogan a saying that said, you know, "quitaron tanto, que nos quitaron el miedo." They took so much away from us that we've lost our fear, they took our fear away. Poverty takes fear away from people and when we entered Brooklyn College those of us with the potential to learn, many of us were the first ones in our family, the first generation to go to college. My father went to second grade school. My mother graduated from sixth grade elementary school. So we were the first persons. We were emboldened by the fact that we can learn that we can fight and for the dignity of our people. We were chased out of neighborhoods. We were told like Stuyvesant high school, especially, the Blacks and Puerto Ricans, they're too angry to learn, they're too angry to learn they can't, they're too militant. I remember I was on the football team, made it to the football team, and then was dismissed from the football team because I was one of the radicals at Stuyvesant High School. Everything that we do when we struggle against injustice comes with a price comes with a cost. Every student that's ever participated in any struggle, particularly Brooklyn College and the Puerto Rican Studies Department and the Black Studies Department have sacrificed. Some of us were delayed in our graduation, some people didn't continue education, many did. Many did. But it came

at a cost. I think that we didn't pay enough attention to the spiritual, the emotional and the physical toll that this was taking on us. Later we learned, I learned later that that was one of the pieces that was missing.

Pam Sporn So tell me about that struggle, the BC 44. When you arrived, what were the issues? What were the issues around CUNY, what were the issues around the world at that time? And what was, what were you guys doing right at Brooklyn College?

Carlos Alejandro We were fighting for open admissions, we were making sure that the doors also would remain open to our community.

Pam Sporn What was open admissions about?

Carlos Alejandro Open admissions was that anyone in the city, right from my recollection, that has a high school diploma or a GED can go, tuition free, can attend college for reduced costs, for my understanding. From my recollection, I'm in my 60s so you have to bear with me here. So we were fighting to make sure that the university that Brooklyn College was kept open. When I arrived at Brooklyn College, there were 32,000 students. By the time I graduated and left, it was down to 19,000, maybe 20,000 students over so many years. So there was a cod. And recently basically, it's a Black and Puerto Rican, at that time, it was Black and Latinos, and it's many other groups. But we were the ones who were, who would suffer the consequences, we were the ones who were, enter college and not have the resources that we would need. So Puerto Rican studies was absolutely important in all of this. The professor's made it possible, they modeled for see just by existing. Just by someone like Antonio Nadal and Milga existing, just by working, they model that you can get this that you can arrive that you can struggle that you can overcome. Again, most of us came from working class community and we had poor communities where the message was different. The message was, you're never going to get anywhere the message is you're too angry, you know, or you're too leftist or you're too whatever. Yet we go to Brooklyn College and then we see how education transformed not just individuals but transformed communities as a whole.

Pam Sporn So you were fighting for breaking open access to public education for all kinds of people who have been denied that access and specifically what was the, what was your first involvement with the Puerto Rican Alliance when you arrived at Brooklyn College?

Carlos Alejandro I have an image of how we met. I knew of older members of the Puerto Rican Alliance because I knew people from Brooklyn College before I got here. Before I got to Brooklyn College. How did I...

Pam Sporn How did you become involved with the, originally with the Puerto Rican Alliance?

Carlos Alejandro There was a confrontation in President Kneller's office. And I had just gotten in from Stuyvesant I was 17 years old and there was some protest around something, around Puerto Rican studies. We went into Kneller's office, and we took over the office not, we didn't hold it but we disrupted and we were there. And I found people, when I went, I found people of like mind and like spirit.

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Again, persons who gave a different image, Blacks and Puerto Rican whose image was a positive image, men and women, young men and women who would struggle who were into education, but also, if necessary, also physically defending the rights of the Puerto Rican and the Black community. And that's something that was really unique because in the photographs that I brought in, you see men and women, young men and women protesting and also fighting side by side against police because we were on numerous occasions attacked by riot police. There were incidents on this campus of extreme violence against students.

Pam Sporn Can you tell me about some of that?

Carlos Alejandro Yeah, one, well there were several, several incidents, but one major event was on May 3rd 1978, May 3rd 1978. We took over Whitehead Hall. We were protesting attacks on the department but other things on campus because this was a third, we would call it a "third world liberation" from names like that. So we had taken it over and we were holding it. President Kneller gave the go ahead to police, to come in. And we had secured the building when they broke into the building. There were fights that broke on inside the building. If you see the photographs, windows were broken, people were jumping out of the second floor, out of second floor windows or landings in order to escape the police attack. They beat people mercilessly throughout the campus. Persons who had been involved in the protests as well as persons who had not been involved. So there was actually there was an atmosphere of terror on the campus. And it challenged all of us in many different, it challenged our parents, it challenged our families cause all of us had families in one way or another. So it challenged and you kept saying, "what's going on this campus, what's happening here?" So the campus was polarized, and that's not counting the minor skirmishes that we would have throughout the year with student government who would refuse to give us money to go to, something defending equal rights for everyone. They would not, they didn't want to give us money, so there was a protest. So there was skirmishes all the time at Brooklyn College and in that struggle, solidarity was forged among people from diverse backgrounds. It was the most beautiful thing that you

can, that anyone can possibly see. The greatest testament of what was accomplished in Brooklyn College is that we saw beyond the narrowness of just one ethnic group and another. We saw everyone as a village, we formed the village where people who speak Chinese, they can speak English, Spanish, persons from different communities, but we will one in the struggle we were one people saying that enough is enough. And we're not going to turn around. "Nos han quitaron tanto que nos quitaron el miedo." That's really what was driving us at that time and I think it's something that should continue to drive people in education. We are living in difficult times, the importance of education is always there. It's even more so now. Because we need to deconstruct some of these ideas, some of the internalized racist ideas that we hold, some of the perceptions that we have accepted in a non critical way we need to actively deconstruct that and that has to be done in education. That's where it takes place in education as you struggle for that education.

Pam Sporn

I would like to hear the details of what was that BC 44 and the whole struggle for the self determination.

Carlos Alejandro

The Brooklyn College 44. These were three professors and 41 students were arrested after we had occupied, if I remember correctly, it was the Admissions Office or Registrars Office. It was the Registrars Office that we held. We were we were demanding the right to select the Chairperson of our choice, the right to choose. We likened it to decolonization, you know the right to determine our future, and that means that we wanted someone who really represented what we felt this department needed and the vision of the department. So they tried to impose, the institution tried to impose someone on us. And we decided to take over the office. It was a powerful experience because as we were lining up, and the police made a count of the number, said that there's 44 of us, they said there is 44 of them. And then someone said "Brooklyn College 44". And then a journalist, student journalist named Willie, I think it's Rodriguez says "we'll come back to give you more". So it was the "Brooklyn College 44, we'll come back to give you more."

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And that's the spirit that we when they brought the paddy wagons, the tension was high, we had support outside and in the courts. They tried to separate the teachers, the professors and say that they were going to hold them to another, you know hold to a higher accountability. They were going to be sentence on a higher than us and then we insisted that we be treated the same so we were all sentence whatever I can't even remember what it was. But we were all sentenced the same. That struggle at Brooklyn College, the BC 44, The Brooklyn College 44, ignited something in other city universities, in other the campuses. We found Hunter College, who has a strong history of struggle were also rising up

and some of us would go to these other colleges and help them. We had the Puerto Rican Alliance was not just in Brooklyn College. There were similar organizations throughout CUNY. I remember going, there's one in the Bronx, I can't remember the name, the name of that college in the Bronx. But it was a City University, my brother, one of my brothers went to that one and he was involved over there.

So the Puerto Rican struggle, that's always taking place along with the African American, the Black community. It was jumping off all over and we were very much aware of what was happening in Vietnam because a lot of this was informed by the fact that many of our young people had been sent to Vietnam. We were aware of that, we were aware of the colonial situation in Puerto Rico and we, our position was that we had to integrate these, we had to connect them, they were not disconnected, that the oppression that we were experiencing in a university setting is connected to the fact that so many of us were not only sent to Vietnam, we were sent to those places, those, the front lines were many of us died, many more of our youth died than others, than other groups. So the, we were mindful of that some of us had been at Wall Street, where construction workers, I forget what it's called, it a major confrontation with construction workers who marched on Wall Street saying "love it or leave it", while we were marching protesting the war in Vietnam. And it was a major major conflict where the police actually stepped aside and let the construction workers who were marching in formation attack anti war demonstrators. So all of this was in the mix, all of this. The political prisoners, you have Lolita Lebrón and the others that were in jail because they had attacked Blair House and Congress and this was something that at age 15 we were hearing about, I was hearing about it. Wait a second we have people, Albizu Campos, Don Pedro Albizu Campos. We've had these people, role models that stood and they fought. Albizu Campos, I think he had two PhDs, was a lawyer, spoke seven languages. An excellent role model for a Black Puerto Rican growing up in the projects in college. So my love for languages was actually born out of my following Albizu Campos' life. I say, my God, he came from poverty, he comes, came from dirt poor, he was dirt poor, didn't have shoes as a little boy. And he accomplished something, that is the spirit of the Puerto Rican people. That's the spirit that we actually embraced at Brooklyn College and in the Puerto Rican Studies Department, which was also as a whole very much pro independence. Okay, the Puerto Rican always has been.

Pam Sporn Were you learning about Don Albizu Campos and Lolita Lebron at Stuyvesant High School?

Carlos Alejandro No.

Pam Sporn Or in your elementary school?

Carlos Alejandro Nowhere. No.

...The awareness actually comes from the older, we would call them the older brothers and sisters who started to educate us. I remember that I was working out, we had a community center in Bedford Stuyvesant, some of us would workout in this community center. I was 14 years old and an older African American man, older by three years, three or four years. He tells me he says, "Charlie, you's a Black man little brother." And I remember I waved " I ain't Black man, I'm Puerto Rican. And then he said, "that's just when I said, you is a Black man." Now this man with those words, planted a seed that took me to Africa. That took me to a place where I began to look at and consciously understand that as a Puerto Rican, I am a Black man. That my ancestors come from Africa. That I look this color not because I am from India, but because I am African, I'm Taino Indian, and I have Spanish blood. That is what's happening.

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So this one brother, it's amazing how experiences, just connection. So I found him very, I said this guy really, and then I went to my house I said mommy, are we Black? Where are we? Where are we from? Is that...so I started to talk to her about it and then it opened up a whole new avenue, area of study and research that empowered me, that empowered me so I can say I'm Afro-Boricua when say I'm Afro-Boricua, that's who I am, in my birth certificates for my son and daughter, that's what's there. They are Black.

Pam Sporn What did you mother say when you said "mommy what are we?"

Carlos Alejandro My mother said, hay gente negra, because my grandfather was Black, and then she started to tell me about Loiza Aldea, which is where my family is from. And she would say, "and your great grandfather used to speak Spanish, but with an African intonation." I said, "Mommy?" She said, "si," [mimicks african intonation] she would say like that. That's how he would speak. So and then another grandfather would play Baquiné, which is played when an infant dies and that tradition comes from Ghana from the Ashanti, that's where that comes from. So el Baquiné comes from Africa. So it took me to a place where I fully began the journey of embracing the Africaness in me up to the point that in 2005, I fly to Nigeria to Africa, and I initiate as a priest in African traditional religion, in the indigenous religion of the Yoruba people. And part of the root of that came from how I was raised. That awareness that something has been taken away from my people, something, something powerful. There's a reason why they went to Africa and then said that your God is not the right God, follow our God. And our God, according to them, you have to turn the other cheek, and he has blue eyes and blonde hair. So again, entering into this whole thing

with the Afro- with the Blackness that I found in Brooklyn College, that awareness allowed me to do that deconstructing like just kind of take this say, Why do I look the way that I am? Why do we feel the way that we feel and many in Brooklyn College were going through that. That whole thing of becoming aware.

Pam Sporn I was going to ask if this particular awareness that you had that, I don't know if all the Puerto Rican students had, opened up more means of communication between the, or more unity between the Puerto Rican Alliance and the Black Student Organization. What was that relationship like?

Carlos Alejandro What was our relationship with the Puerto Rican and the Black community?

Pam Sporn Black students at Brooklyn College.

Carlos Alejandro Me personally or? In general, it was a positive one because we came from the same place. We suffered the same things. In fact, some of us in Bedford Stuyvesant had fought against police in protest in the community, prior to going to Brooklyn College. The thing I think is important to understand is what took place in college, in Brooklyn College reflected what was happening in our communities at the time. There was no such thing as our entering Brooklyn College campus and leaving all of who we were at the door. It didn't happen. We were reminded actually, every day that we were in Brooklyn College, that we were different. That we were other.

Pam Sporn How so? How were you reminded that you were other?

Carlos Alejandro I took a creative writing course. And I wrote a poem, and part of it said, "afraid to walk the streets at night, afraid to walk the streets on the night that John Wayne is resurrected inside the sick minds of racist police who moonlight as drunken cross burners." That was the phrase and then there was more before and after. And the professor looked at this and said, this is trash. He said, this is not poetry. This is propaganda. This is....

An interesting thing had happened is that I had a friend who worked at the Puerto Rican Forum, the National Puerto Rican Forum, they were involved in different kinds of things. And she took my poem to someone from there. And the man looked at, I wish I could remember his name, but he wrote something in there and actually, the binder that I brought in with the photographs he had given to me, got sent to me so that I can keep all of my other poems. So he was outraged that this professor had done that and was actually empowering me to move forward. So now they're called aggressions, micro aggressions, aggressions. This is what goes on a very

subtle kind of level, where someone is not allowed to be all of who they are. Figures its a creative writing class, where everyone else can creatively express themselves, unless you came with a different worldview, unless you were informed differently.

Pam Sporn

[00:30:21]

So, how did this experience relate to your commitment to defending this Puerto Rican Studies Department?

Carlos Alejandro

I felt and I actually (...) that I still feel that the Puerto Rican Studies Department at that time was actually holding back an assault against our people. It was an assault, that is an attack on our culture, on our history, on our spiritualities that includes Santería, Espiritismo, all of these things. So there was an assault, when you walk into that matrix of the Puerto Rican Studies Department, you were free to speak of Shango and Obatala. You were free to speak of Yemaya that we went to this place and we saw this African manifestation of something spiritual. We hear, the African poets from Puerto Rico, [quotes poem]. In Brooklyn College, this is who we are. So if you're receiving that light on a daily basis, when you're there, when you walk into the darkness, you have something, you have it. The darkness cannot overcome the light that's been placed. Once you know who you are, once you've been set free, the mind is free, then the heart can also feel freely. And that's what took place. That's how I would say.

Pam Sporn

Can you go back? Do you remember, what were the differences between the two candidates for the Chair Puerto Rican Studies that, there was the People's Choice, and then the one that the university was trying to impose? What was different about them?

Carlos Alejandro

I think, you know, people might say that they had different skill sets, qualifications, I think, essentially, is that María Sánchez was our choice. That she had already demonstrated to us who she was and where her heart was, and this other person was being imposed. Now, when you come from a colony, where colonialism has been imposed, it's enough it's enough to say, 'fuck you, no. we're not going to take it.' Right, 'that's enough.'

Pam Sporn

What did María Sánchez have that you all...

Carlos Alejandro

There was somethi-, you know, the, it's just a feeling because I'm trying to, the feelings, she had a very strong maternal instinct and this was a matriarch I would remember her as the matriarch that...

Oh my god, during, during one of the, we were going to be arrested in BC 44, we knew was going to happen. And there was a mixup with my clothing. And I don't know how she was where I was we were, and she ironed my pants. She ironed the pants that I was going to wear. Okay,

that's my recollection. I just can't remember where exactly a lot of us lived around Brooklyn College, like I lived at Newkirk Avenue and then others were on East 21st. But the thing is she had a strong maternal instinct, there was something about her. And this is a factor, you know, because Puerto Ricans, we are relational people we, affective you know, we hug we kiss, you know, so we have someone leading a Puerto Rican Studies Department that consistently had inappropriate affects, its not going to go over very well with us. I think she was the person for the job. She was uniquely qualified to do that job and she was able to deal with all the diversity among the Puerto Rican community because it's not like we're not diverse. There are differences in terms of political organization. At that time, we had different independentistas who had different ways of looking at things. We didn't always get along and then that played itself out in the Puerto Rican Studies Department as well.

Pam Sporn

Can you comment about the leadership of women in the Puerto Rican Studies program, Department? Was it significant?

Carlos Alejandro

The image that I have, I would actually mention, Milga. Milga Nadal. And Milga, I first remember seeing her on a video. At the Puerto Rican, this... I was there at that, it was the Puerto Rican Day Parade, where the Young Lords had said, we meet you at the front of the parade. In other words, the police no longer marching in front it's the Puerto Rican community at the front of the parade.

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So again, we're there so we're there, Tony was there, Tony Nadal. I didn't know them at the time. And there was a big, big fighting that that took place and in one of the videos, you see Milga charging at a cop she was just, so you keep that in your mind, in terms of her spirit, so this is a woman then who could model because it's not like everyone saw her right, but that models the kind of strength and resilience that you need right in this struggle. In the struggle of the Puerto Rican people you cannot, we could have never had it without the women. Many times the women were the ones who were leading. And this we see this in churches we see it in many places right the Pastor may be a male but the women are the one who made it. And in Brooklyn College and in the Puerto Rican Studies Department, we were intentional about deconstructing machismo, we did utilize criticism and self criticism, when we felt that something was not right, something was not going well. So we would say that if a woman can fight for liberation and justice, that a man can also cry, so it was almost like a humanizing of both. Does that make sense?

Pam Sporn

Yeah, where does that come from in a society that is machista? Not just Puerto Rican but our United States, the world. Where did that come from

that you are intentional about deconstructing male chauvinism, deconstructing machismo?

Carlos Alejandro

That came through education, political education, in concientización, that we began to see in the real, Lolita Lebron led, led the attack on the Congress. It was Lolita Lebron was the leader. It's going back and then kind of paying attention to how our history was told to us. The my mother, was not a passive woman. She was 4 foot 10, he was a strong woman. So my image of a Puerto Rican woman is a woman who stands up and if she has to fight, she will fight. When I went to Brooklyn College I saw, I mean and machismo was an issue, but it was an issue that there was a foundation to fight against it because the main thing that we were focusing on was liberation of our people, the freeing of our minds transformation in whatever form that would take. So it was people coming in and educating and this was happening in political organizations, like the Young Lords, it was happening in the Black Panther Party, it was happening all over. There was in a paying of, the paying of attention to the roles that people have been typecast, that a woman can't fight, you know. They shouldn't be fighting, yet we look at the Kurds and the women in the Kurds are amazing. And when I went to Nicaragua during the Civil War there, and I saw women with AK-47s fighting for their liberation, right, so if you think that life takes us on that journey, where you say, look, this is not right. This is not the way that it should go. And we were able to work that out in Brooklyn College I think successfully. If you look at it over an extended period of time, and I'm sure there were ebbs and flows in this, but anything that led to oppression we confronted. There were images, there's perceptions of gays and lesbians that people would have at different points. Yet, the gay and lesbian community at Brooklyn College was, were in the struggle. So there was an organic way to deal with people's prejudice and ideas because we were struggling together. When you struggle side by side with someone, you change each other, it's impossible not to be transformed by others who are involved in a struggle with you. You learn, you learn about yourself, you get, if you're open enough, you get to see the world through their eyes, that's the blessing of Brooklyn College, that so many people were able to speak, they were able to, you know, we created a context where people would speak unapologetically, that means that people would say things that normally they wouldn't say and they would say because they wanted to give a gift so that we can change, so that we can grow.

Pam Sporn

What has been the...what did you major in by the way?

Carlos Alejandro

I had a dual a major Political Science and Puerto Rican studies, minored in history and English.

Pam Sporn And what has been the lasting impact on your life of being involved in the Puerto Studies Department and the struggle to defend it?

Carlos Alejandro What is the impact that it has had on me? (background question).

[00:39:40]

The impact has been everywhere that I have gone in terms of my work, I'm involved in ministry. So as a Chaplain at Rikers Island, New York City Department of Corrections, I worked at the Central Punitive Segregation unit and at the Tombs, where racial tension and conflict, the system needs a certain level of tension. So inmate on inmate tension, so that the inmates do not unite to fight over food, like quality of food, or to fight the system to say respect our women, our wives when they come in to visit us, things like that. It gave me a strong sense of justice, a strong sense of justice. So for example, when a Latino inmate would come into jail, and they were vulnerable, I had relationships with different ethnic groups and I would say not this one. Not this one, this person is not shouldn't be here. I'd say, "cover him watch his back." It allowed me to learn how to defuse how do you defuse the situation when you have African Americans and Latinos about to take each other out? My heart is both Black and Puerto Rican. So when they placed me in that jail at Rikers Island, they placed the right person because I related well to the African American community as well as to the Puerto Rican community and was able to bring reconciliation and kind of diffuse potential violence, which would go really bad at Rikers Island. In my field as a Chaplain and as a trainer of Chaplains, culture and race is also an issue. I am one of maybe 10 Latinos in the country that are certified to train other Chaplains. It's a disgrace in terms of the numbers. Brooklyn College gave me the wisdom, the knowledge and the understanding to address injustice anywhere that I go. So if I sit at a table, and I see that there's 10 White people at this table, this this ministry, professional Chaplains and Counselors, and I'm the only man of color I say, well, what's wrong with this picture? And why are we not reaching out to these different communities, to bring in Imams to bring in persons from diverse religious and cultural traditions and actually I'm known for it, that's what I do in the world, that's how I am. I've been recruited to serve on the Board of a hospital in Florida. And they are looking specifically at how to deal with race and culture because this particular group had been all White all of the years and the community now is demanding something else. All of that for me as I was driving, I said comes from Brooklyn College. This is where we saw it, this is where we saw the, I saw the importance of being able to defend the right of everybody to sit at the table. Essentially, that's what we're talking about. Do we have the right to sit at anyone's table at any time as an equal, and we're still struggling with that in this country.

Tami Gold Were you arrested at Brooklyn College?

Carlos Alejandro I was arrested twice in Brooklyn College as part of the BC 44 and I was beaten and arrested in January 12, 1978 with a professor and another student, I required 20 stitches to close the wound to my head. We were beaten, we were stomped and the head of security at Brooklyn College at the time, as I was handcuffed behind my back on the ground, he came and kicked me in my chest. So I've had two experiences. The BBC 44 was handled well. This other one is where security called the police. So what, it's important to understand is that, that spring, that winter/spring, January 12, 1978, a professor, myself and another student are beaten and arrested by police, brutally beaten by police. A few months later, in May 3rd 1978, you see the photographs of the police riot that took place at Brooklyn College. So that whole semester was marked by a lot of a struggle intensity and violence, violence against the Black and the Puerto Rican community on the campus.

Pam Sporn What were those about? We know that we see the BC 44 had to do with fighting for the right to choose who you wanted to be the chair of the Puerto Rican Studies Department. What was the backstory? What was the struggle with that in 1978?

Carlos Alejandro The backstory is we again, we were still struggling to keep Open Admissions at Brooklyn College. They were instituting, I think they were called retention exams or something like, that if you had to pass an exam. But the, so Brooklyn College the struggle never ceased. It's like they, I have a flyer there where it tells you almost month by month, what was going, how it was there, the pacing. So if there's a meeting in the Student Government, something might erupt there because there was a backlash about the Black and Puerto Rican protest.

[00:45:00]

Anything can, from classrooms students having like this one woman and she was Puerto Rican who had trouble in the dance department because her body didn't fit the European model and they would say there was something wrong with her dancing. Similar to someone in the news recently, a young woman who was on a swimming team, and was disqualified because the bathing suit showed too much of her rear. But it was a cultural thing because she was larger because she was a person of color. So it was the same thing this that this young woman was a dancer at the Dance Department of Brooklyn College, faced discrimination in classroom, one of the professors because she wasn't able to do something with her body. These were micro aggressions and they were happening all the time, it really was happening in class. Now, that doesn't mean every class, every professor was that way. We had outstanding professors there. It made it possible for us to struggle, the fact that there were other people involved.

Tami Gold

Another question, I came out of the same time, were you scared? I used to get scared during some demonstrations that resulted in police violence. When we (...) hospital, I could just remember. Having kids with me, having to hide behind subway entrances. Were you ever scared because you've been beaten, you'd arrested? How did you react emotionally during this time?

Carlos Alejandro

That's a great question. In terms of my emotional what the impact that it had emotionally is that it took a toll. Self care, we were not speaking of self care at the time. You know, what do you do for fun if...it was not about that. The curious thing in responding to this is that I was injured, it was January, where I was injured by police requiring 20 stitches. A few months later in May I'm in that building in Whitehead hall in that takeover jumping out of the building out of the second floor landing with others. I questioned myself, as I was driving in, how could I have done that I was blown away as, I couldn't have been, I couldn't have been in that building doing that at the time because I had just been injured. Right, and you know, the only thing that came from me is that it was the trauma. I think I was traumatized. It was a trauma. The driveness that you're, you know, you have to keep pushing you keep pushing no matter what. Is fear in the mix? Absolutely, positively fear is in the mix. The thing is that in order to have courage, you must feel fear. Right? Without fear, how can you be courageous? So the fear actually served as a catalyst as something that moved me and I'm sure it moved other people towards taking something that looked really courageous. But it came understanding that everything comes at a price. Everything comes at a price. When I see young people struggling now like involved in social justice struggles, I pray for their self care, because they can survive it physically, but my concern is can they survive it spiritually and emotionally. And it seems to me that is this day and age, I'm seeing the Black Lives Matters movement, they have Chaplains, they have people who are addressing the spiritual care needs of activists. Activists always want to serve other people. We don't do well with self care. And I think it's a mistake. It's a mistake for us not to care for our mental health, our emotional and our physical health. It's a mistake. All of us were afraid. All of us were afraid because we knew that someone can get hurt and hurt really badly. Some received death threats from other people. It was one of the more difficult times. When you're trying to get to class, and you have to watch your back to make sure that no one is going to harm you. I remember speaking to a professor, Political Science professor who wanted to talk to me after the class. And as he's talking to me, he notices that I keep, because it was change of class, he's notices that I that I'm kind of aware of what's behind me, he said, I'm talking to you and you're not even listening to me! I said, I am listening to you. I'm watching my back. I can't talk to you here. Can we go someplace else? So it was there fear. Yes, there was fear. You know, when you go to

a demonstration all of us I remember the women would take off their earrings. In that photograph there, there's a young woman who had been beaten by police, but she went back to protest wearing a helmet. So fear. Yeah, I think that at Brooklyn College we became intimate friends with fear and we learned that fear is not power. That fear is an impulse, that something, an energy that can lead you to do something courageous and righteous.

Tami Gold

[00:50:03]

...So you, you took over the building and tell us a actual story of how did it operate inside?

Carlos Alejandro

When we went into the building, the first thing we had to do was clear people from the building. That means students and/or professors and we had to encourage them to leave the building we take, and we did it basically, I would use the term professionally. We worked professionally. There was more resistance in the, in the history department, understandably so because these were the World War II veterans and Korean War veterans. So you would understand, 'what are you guys doing?' We said, this is what we're doing, so we escorted them out, we they locked their offices, blah, blah, blah.

Inside, we had I would say between 25 maybe 30 people occupying the building and we divide it up to close the doors. We used belts, we use sticks in between the doorknobs in order to keep the police from getting to us. To return to the theme of fear, we did notice when they, we did, you know our security people noticed that the police had broken into the building. So at one point they were chasing us while we were in the building. And as we went from one area to another, that's when we took off belts and tied doors and put chairs up to slow them down. In the album that I brought, right next to Whitehead Hall, there's a, connecting to the library, there's a landing on the second floor. And you'll see men and women about maybe 10, at the moment men and women, looking over. It was their only way out of the building. And at one point the, in order to get because the police were under them right underneath them, in this glass window, this window and the window had to be broken in order to get the cops away. So someone broke the window reached over shattered the window and then the cops had to retreat. As the police retreated the persons were able to jump off the, off the roof. And there's photographs of that, so all of this affects how someone views the world right? It impacts how you see law enforcement how you see justice, and if anything, it created more activists. It was an outrage. It was an absolute outrage to see what they were doing. And the, yeah fear, we were afraid, but we went anyway. "Nos quitaron tanto que nos quitaron el medio." That's what it was. We're gonna do it anyway. And we did it and I feel proud of my people. I feel proud of the Black and the Puerto Rican community, that we

have the courage at the time and still do. Now with others to turn things around. We don't have to accept things. That's what we learned at Brooklyn College. We don't have to accept something because they say this is the way that it is. Where I work, things come up too that deal with race and culture and I operate in the same way. The fact that they say it has to be this way does not mean that we accept it, that we have an obligation an ethical and a moral obligation to stand against injustice. I run into people from Brooklyn College periodically. And it seems to be that almost everyone is involved in something that empowers other people that they take a stand against, injustice. It doesn't matter where they are. It could be the MTA. It can be in the Board of ED. Law enforcement, Corrections. It was a formation that has impacted me for my whole life.

Tami Gold

When did you find out in your soul, in your guts that you were Puerto Rican?

Carlos Alejandro

When this guy, I don't know if I told you that, Marty was a member of the Black Panther Party, when he said, "You is a Black man little brother." I realized that I was Black man, is that was the question? When did I realized that I was Black?

When I realized that it was Puerto Rican was when that man said to me, "you're a Black man, little brother". I said, "get outta here im Puerto Rican." He said, "you is Black man." what he set in motion was a search for me to understand what went into being Puerto Rican. That's why I attribute it to him. So if I am Black, that means that when my friends when I was younger, that the friends would say that they're going down south for vacation that I come south from the south, too but its from really south in another country. So it helped me to celebrate the African-ness that, the blood that flows through my veins, that I was able to embrace it and do it boldly. And the term here is unapologetically. Because sometimes we half step when we do things. This brother shared a powerful lesson for me. And it opened up a whole world so then I learned about the Caciques about Tainos and about all of these things in a more richer way. I come to Brooklyn College and there's a whole department dedicated to the education of the Puerto Rican people and Puerto Rican history, culture, etc.

Pam Sporn

[00:55:12]

I have Question about the faculty members, the professors, the three professors who were arrested with the students who were they?

Carlos Alejandro

Tony Nadal, Antonio Nadal. Sonia Nieto, and I can't remember the third person.

Pam sPorn

Where they all Puerto Rican?

Carlos Alejandro Oh, no, no, no. Sonia was Espanola.

Pam Sporn Oh, okay. And the third was Latina or Latino?

Carlos Alejandro There would be a Latino, it would have been someone in the department (background audio).

Pam Sporn Do you have thoughts about the impact that the struggle at Brooklyn College had on CUNY as a whole?

Carlos Alejandro I'm not sure I can explore that with any, because it's just been a lifetime since I've been here and I haven't followed that. I would imagine because we did go to other, to help in the protest that the impact is similar to what we've done because they were just as active as we were, they were just as active.

Tami Gold You talk about self care, and about there were some, losses? No, sacrifices, what do you mean by that? Was anyone hurt? Did anyone suffer physically? Did anyone have, just the whole 9 yards.

Carlos Alejandro Imagine, the way that I can answer that in terms of the impact around suffering in the struggle, like the impact that it had. It's a very important thing because we're called to sacrifice I mean, we struggled. Right? So we were involved in struggle, and it began to take a toll in this way if you're not sleeping, well, right. Simple thing. If you're always in meetings, plus you're working and going to school, your energy is depleted. I would say that there was problems with some people with alcohol, precisely because of the lack of self care, the taking the time out. The hypertension, you name it. I would say that we suffered because of the lack of the spiritual emotional care that we all needed. It's always good to, it feels good to struggle. But life can't just be struggling. You can't just be involved in the movement to change things, it has to be balanced. We have to celebrate life while we're fighting to change it and I found with myself that one of the things that I did not do well, as an activist was to take care of myself. I stopped working out, I stopped doing a lot of things because I was fully immersed in struggling against injustice. My greatest concern now as a man in my 60s and as a grandfather is that the young people, like my granddaughters when they struggle and my daughter when she did, is that they take care of themselves. That the fact is we're not being called to be, climb up on a cross and be crucified. We're called to struggle and survive the struggle. And that means that we have to survive it physically well, but also emotionally and psychologically, we have to. That's the value of it. We've lost, people they drop out of school, were never able to regroup. Some persons, for example, received so many low grades that they were

not able to return. I was on an extended program because I started in '72, and didn't graduate officially until 1980. Right? Now, was I taking classes all that time? Absolutely not. But still, I feel that I lost a few years and actually, not really that long ago, I was asking myself, did I make a mistake when I struggled at Brooklyn College? What could I have done differently? I could have completed two or three PhDs by, with all that I had done in Brooklyn College, and I wrestled with myself, I wrestled, I challenged myself to look at this. And what I came up with is that the education that I received in the struggle is so valuable is worth anything that I might have received, formerly, academically. And that truth has guided me and continues to guide me because I've completed two Masters since then, and I'm completing a doctorate as we speak. So the thing of education once it's inside of you, it'll stay there. I would encourage those who are involved in social justice struggles, take care of yourselves, take care of your family, reach out to each other. Right? We're called to sacrifice to protest- yes to protest. Sometimes you can get hurt, you get arrested all of that. But it's over the long run. It's over the long haul, that if you want to struggle for the rest of your life in a competent, effective way, self-care has to be taken. It has to be, we have to know how to pray if you're so inclined. We have to know how to have recreation, how to have fun. I don't remember going to a ball game when I was at Brooklyn College. I wrestled at Brooklyn College and then stop wrestling when I got more involved in politics. So I think it's a mistake that we make if we don't tell other generation, the next generations, maintain that balance so that your whole life is one of struggling for justice in an authentic way.

[End of recorded material at 00:50:10]