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**Interview with Antonio “Tony” Nieves**  
**Interviewed by Pam Sporn and Tami Gold**

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Pam Sporn                    Can you start by telling me when you, how did you get to Brooklyn College? What year did you start? What was that like to be a young Puerto Rican student in Brooklyn College?

Antonio Nieves            Well, when I got to Brooklyn College, I graduated from high school in the spring 1968 and I was inducted into the army. Before I graduated from high school, then I was accepted by the Educational Opportunity Program at Brooklyn College, which was a program for minority students that wanted to go to college. We had to go to a pre, remedial courses over the summer taking math and English. And so I was accepted into the Educational Opportunity Program. And I told him about my being recruited me being called into the army and they said they will take care of it for me. So they called the army they said that I was not going to be able to participate in their activity. I wasn't going to go anyway, I was looking at either leaving the country or going to Canada, but I was not going to participate in the war in Vietnam, my family is we're demonstrating against, my brothers were demonstrating against the war in Vietnam, I had been politically active before I went to Brooklyn College. So I was demonstrating against the war in Vietnam, my first demonstration was against racism in the south, the lunch counter programs that they had boycotts in the south, and they wouldn't let Black people eat at the counter. So I became involved in that in 19, 1964 was, I think my first demonstration. So by the time I got into college, I had been to several demonstrations against racism, several demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. When I got to Brooklyn College, there were two organizations,

Black League of Afro-American Collegians, which is B.L.A.C. and the Puerto Rican Alliance, which is P.R.A. Now I joined both organizations when I got there. I was just starting out in photography, so I was the photographer for both organizations. And since I went to both meetings, in both organizations, I delegated myself to be the liaison between the both organizations. So I was on the Central Committee for B.L.A.C. and I was on the Central Committee for P.R.A. Being at Brooklyn College, my first year, within the first two months, I was working with both organizations. So whatever happened, at B.L.A.C., or the Brooklyn League of Afro-American Collegians, I would bring to the Puerto Rican Alliance or whatever happened at the Puerto Rican Alliance, I would bring to the Black League of Afro-American Collegians, so we will all be on the same page because we were all fighting against, we were all fighting the same struggle. And so I became involved with both organizations.

Pam Sporn                      What drew you to those two organizations? What were the issues that you felt both organizations answered for you what was going on on the campus that you felt like you wanted to be part of those two organizations?

Antonio Nieves                I think that it was more of a community, something in the community because I had gone to Erasmus, Erasmus is predominantly Jewish High School. Brooklyn College, was a predominantly Jewish college, we used to call it Yeshiva high. Most of the people that graduated from Erasmus went to Brooklyn College and became teachers. When I applied to Brooklyn College, I was rejected from Brooklyn College, I had applied to 27 universities and in CUNY and was rejected by all of them. And then at some point, the Educational Opportunity Program of Brooklyn College accepted me because of my grades on my S.A.T's. and so the reason I was drawn to B.L.A.C. and P.R.A. is because they were Blacks, and Puerto Ricans there and it was a community thing. So that's where your friends were, that's where the political activity was. And so that's why I think I joined both organizations.

Pam Sporn                      Did all of the members of the Puerto Rican Alliance necessarily feel an affinity for being also a member of the B.L.A.C.?

Antonio Nieves                No, no, because there was a lot of racism there. There was a lot of racism going on at Brooklyn College, between even Puerto Ricans and Blacks. Puerto Ricans and Blacks were tried, the society tried to separate us as two entities but being Puerto Rican, you have Blacks, you have Whites, you have every color in the rainbow, every kind of hair and every kind of eye color. So the community that I was raised in and the household I was raising was an international household. We didn't see differentiation between people, we didn't see the color. Because we have everybody in our family Black and White.

Pam Sporn

[05:08]

So if that wasn't the case with some of the other Puerto Rican students, what... what kind of conversations were going on? Since you, you felt that affinity? Did you have conversations that would try to present another point of view to those other Puerto Rican students?

Antonio Nieves

I think we had a conference, the first, the first semester that I was at Brooklyn College it was Proud to be Latino, or Proud to be Puerto Rican, we had a conference in upstate New York, where it was just the people from P.R.A., and people from different communities in Harlem and different political organizations that had gotten us together to discuss what it meant to be Puerto Rican and, you know, we discussed about hiding our Black grandmother's in the closet, you know, Puerto Ricans, traditionally, I want to say to just traditionally, they're not, they're not racist. In their culture, we have different people in our culture, or different colors in our culture. But being indoctrinated with the Black and the White of America society, you know, that's been put in our, in our culture now, that you know, if you're Black, step back, if you're White, go forwards. So there was that, that racism does exist in the in the Puerto Rican culture, and is perpetrated by the myths that America has put upon us because it had their own history of racism here. So I think that came out then that Puerto Ricans that are Black have a problem in the White in the white Puerto Rican community. And so those are some of the things that we were struggling with, that we have, we're all one family doesn't matter what color we are. But we have that first identify that we have a problem with racism in the Puerto Rican community. And so that's one of the things that we address in the early the early, the early, the early fall of, of 1968.

Pam Sporn

(background audio) In the fall of 1968, you address this issue of racism within the Puerto Rican community.

Antonio Nieves

Yes, we went to a conference in upstate New York, and the conference was about being Proud to be Puerto Rican, about our cultural identity. And some of the things that we discussed, there was racism, that White Puerto Rican like to hide their Black grandmother's in the closet. And there is a racism that exists in our culture. It's been perpetrated by the racist culture in America, whether you're Black, you have to step back, if you're White, go ahead and one of the things that my mother taught me as a child was that if you're Black, you're not going to get ahead in society. So you need to marry White to improve the race, and this is a typical thing in Puerto Rico. So we have to recognize, we had to recognize that there was racism there and that's one of the issues that we had to deal with and within ourselves. Yes. Well, it's a it's a saying in the culture, hide your Black grandmother in the, in the closet, you know, when you bring people over the house, so you know, you have to recognize that there's racism there. And there's racism in the Puerto Rican community that, you know, light

Whites light, Puerto Ricans get treated better than a Black Puerto Ricans and it was brought out in the conference really in a stark way because somebody started crying. Cookie started crying at the at the conference where we were discussing Black and White and we Joaquin was there at the conference. And I think she called him, I don't know if she called him a nigga or if she didn't call them a nigger. And, you know, she said that, yes, she had this animosity towards him. And everybody in the conference started crying, except Cesar, myself and Joaquin. I think there was somebody else, maybe Lucas, but it was a big emotional. It was a cathartic moment. It was emotional for people, people recognizing their own racism, people who recognize that they had believed in a certain thing that they needed to move forward and change.

Pam Sporn

How does that relate to your commitment to fighting for curriculum changes at Brooklyn College? What was being taught about Puerto Rican or Latino culture, issues of race at Brooklyn College when you were there?

Antonio Nieves

[09:50]

Puerto Ricans didn't have a history. There was no Puerto Rican history. There was no Black history. The only Black history was that Blacks were slaves and you know, Puerto Rican, were had no, I guess the only culture that Puerto Ricans had was music. But there was no history. So when I got to Brooklyn College, I had started studying on my own I, at high school, I started reading a lot of literature about different cultures and different races. And I saw that every culture, and every race has a history. So my goal, and Malcom X was one of my teachers, also, Malcolm X, you know, enlightened me to the fact that we have a history, we just have to go find it. And so I thought it was important for me to learn my history. And I thought it is important to learn Black history also and Puerto Rican history, because Puerto Ricans are one third Black, we have Spanish and we have Indian, and we have Afro-American in us. So we're part of all three races. So why would you not like one race and like the other, you know, that doesn't? What kind of self respect are you going to have for yourself, who can you, you know, I didn't have any identity when I went to college, I was looking for who I was, you know. All my life, I've been told that I was nobody, and that I was nothing and I would never accomplish anything. The same thing that Orlando had with his experience in medical school, I had in high school, when they asked me what I wanted to be and I told them, I wanted to be a doctor. And they asked me what your father was. And I said, Well, my father was a carpenter. And they said, well, that's an honorable profession, maybe you should do that. And I said, no, I want to be a doctor. And so racism during that period of time was as common as apple pie. It was very prevalent, people were being killed constantly in the street. So if you didn't struggle for what you wanted, if you didn't, if you wanted to just sit on the sidelines, and I wasn't

one of those people, I come from a family that has struggled, my mother struggled, and she taught me how to struggle, my brothers struggle. So sometimes I say, I blame it on my Christian upbringing, that we should always take care of the underdog, we should always take care of our brothers and sisters, no matter who they are, we should uplift the poor. I was very ignorant when I went to high school, I didn't know a lot about society or things that I learned later on. But, you know, self identity was one of the most important things at that time, because we weren't learning self identity. The only thing that latins did was make trouble, cut people up and were criminals.

Tami Gold                      Very heavy, also heavy that you say you didn't know yourself and you didn't know who you are.

Pam Sporn                      So how important was the Puerto Rican Alliance to you in shaping that identity and affirming that you were somebody?

Antonio Nieves                We were looking for our identity. We were trying to study, we were trying to find out what identity was, it was being, we were told we didn't have any history. We didn't have any identity. So I knew that we did. You know, just listening to Malcolm X, listening to the Young Lords, listening to the Panthers, you know, other progressive groups, S.D.S. was out there, the Communist Party was out there. The struggle for Palestine was there. I had, you know, first heard about the struggle for Palestine back in '68, and '69 and I was reading literature and try to understand, I've always tried to understand what was going on in the world, and why the world functioned the way it was, and why was there oppression? Why were people looked down upon. And I tried to understand the international politics. I never got a handle on it. But during the meantime, I've learned a lot about the world.

Pam Sporn                      Tell me about the demands that the Puerto Rican and Black students were putting forward at Brooklyn College. What were the demands of the Puerto Rican Alliance and Black League of Afro-American Collegians?

Antonio Nieves                B.L.A.C. sa I said, when I got to college be Puerto Ricans and the Puerto Rican Alliance and Black League of Afro-American Collegians was organization that were striving to have self identity. Self identity was the most important thing at that time. Education was very important also. And the only way that I saw I think, was from Marcus Garvey, or Booker T. Washington that said, you know, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps don't depend on anybody. And that's what the Black community was, you know, doing and the Puerto Rican community we were trying to uplift ourselves by knowing more about ourselves.

[14:59]

So and I think it was December, Orlando came to me and he said group was going to California, that the Black Panthers were having a Black Studies conference on how to set up Black Studies in schools. And he told me he was going and I said well what about me? How come you're not sending me? I said, you know, I belong to, I'm a member of both organizations you know, I'm the liaison, don't you also need pictures of what happens in California, you know, you need your photographer there. So he gave me his spot. And so I ended up going to the conference in Oakland, California. And I think we went, Ray Aviles was there, he was a member of the Young Lords. Askia, Davis was a member of the Black Panther Party, and I believe he went we came and there was, I think two sisters went, I'm really bad on names, but also two sisters from the organization went from B.L.A.C. and when we came back, and Larry Sparks, was a member of the Communist Party, but he wasn't a member of the student body. When we came back from Oakland, when we first got to Oakland, we went to the to the Black Panther headquarters and to me it was it was an exhilarating moment, because I walked in, and theres Panthers were dressed in Black with their berets and holding M-16s. On either side of the door, and they said they were expecting a raid that night. So I think we slept under the pool table that night. And then the next day, we went to a motel and we saw Bobby Seale and Kathleen Cleaver they spoke there. They gave us a bunch of literature about how to set up a program for B.L.A.C., for Black Studies. We came back, when I came back with the other members of the organization we sat down with the Central Committee and told them what our findings were. Sometime in the course of that I think when we wrote the 18 demands, there might have been about eight of us, four men, six men and two women that wrote the 18 demands. It was a Central Committee of P.R.A. and Central Committee and B.L.A.C. and so one of the important things that when we wrote up the demands, because it was, it was, in California it was Black studies, it wasn't in Puerto Rican studies, just Black studies. So what we did was,, we took the Black studies and we made it into Puerto Rican studies also. So everything that was we were demanding for Black League of Afro-American Collegians, we were also demanding for the Puerto Rican Alliance. So we came up with the demands. And every demand we changed, it was Black and Puerto Rican, and then every other demand was Puerto Rican and Black. So there wouldn't be any divisiveness. And so we presented it to the student body. It was funny to present it to the student bodies because my brother had a Xerox machine in the basement because he was a member of the Du Bois club and so we printed up leaflets, so I printed up leaflets in my basement, that said secret meeting and gave it out to the third world students on the campus. We didn't give it out to the White students on campus, because they weren't the people we're trying to influence and recruit. We had, I think about 300 people at the first meeting, the secret meeting, and we presented the 18 demands, the 19 18, 21 demands to them.

Pam Sporn                   What was the main gist of the 19 demands? Can you tell me the top four demands?

Antonio Nieves            I think the first one was that (...) The first demand of the 19 demands was that we admit all Blacks and Puerto Ricans in the city, because Brooklyn College, Brooklyn College represents the city and we pay taxes in the city. And so Brooklyn College should reflect the tax base of the of New York. And so we need to have more Blacks and Puerto Rican students in there. So that was the first demand. The second demand was for more ethnic studies, more Black, Afro-American Studies, as to the origin and what the history of Africans in Africa and how it relates to America, to American Afro, American Africans. Also the history of Puerto Rico that we should have courses that taught, taught us what Puerto Rican history was, we wanted to know what our history was. We wanted to know what identity was. We knew that we had one, we wanted teachers that would teach us those, those histories, and we wanted them to come from the culture. We wanted afro American teachers and we wanted Puerto Rican teachers to teach us our own culture. We knew we had a culture, we knew we had a history, and it wasn't being taught, it was being, what we were being fed was propaganda and lies, that there was a Puerto Rican history to learn and we were not being taught it. One of the demands also that we had, it wasn't it was more of a demand that reflected the political times that we wanted to end the war in Vietnam. We didn't expect that we would get that demand but we put it in there for us not for posterity. But you know, the word escapes me at the moment.

Pam Sporn                   [20:57]  
Did you feel there was a connection between the university and the war going on?

Antonio Nieves            No, there wasn't, there was (...) I think Orlando talked about it earlier, there was a relationship between they were doing, not only were they recruiting on campus, but they were also doing biological experiments on the campus. And we didn't think that Brooklyn College should be a haven for the military to be doing experiments on campus, that we didn't want them recruiting people on campus. So yes, there was a connection. And I think that might have been reflected in the demands also, that we demanded, you know, no more recruitment, no more biological experiments being done by the military on campus. And Open Admissions, everybody should, everybody has a right to knowledge and also, there was a big thing about, well, if you let Puerto Ricans and Blacks in then you're going to lower the standards and we said, well, the standard was already low in the high schools, and they weren't teaching us properly so we couldn't even go to college and be successful. So we demanded

remedial courses for people who were in high school and coming to college.

Pam Sporn Do you remember any slogans being spray painted around the campus?

Antonio Nieves No, I don't remember any slogans I don't think we did that. I don't think we did any graffiti. Every action that was taken on campus was coordinated. Nothing happened uncoordinated. The central committee made sure that we had people where we needed them to be, we made sure that whatever activity was taking place on campus was either, was headed by was coordinated by the Central Committee there nothing happened on the campus that we were not aware of. There was no demonstrations, no activities everything came from us.

No, we had a demonstration where we burned the head of a pig on campus, on the quadrangle in front of Boylan Hall. And we had chants, about Peck I think it was President Peck you lie, and so we burned a pig's head. We had demonstrations during that particular during that particular winter, that first winter. We had demonstrations for Malcolm X we celebrated Malcolm X's birthday. I don't think we did too much celebrating for Martin Luther King, but we were very, very people were interested in struggling. There were people who wanted to do it peacefully like Malcolm X, like Martin Luther King, there are people who advocated for peaceful demonstrations. Martin Luther King had been killed through violence, Malcolm X have been killed through violence, we were being killed in the streets, Black people being killed and dragged out of their homes, Puerto Ricans will be thrown off roofs, we took over the church in Harlem because it had killed a Puerto Rican either in the jail or had thrown them off the roof, that was Young Lords. We had members of the Young Lords in our organization we had members of the Black Panther Party in our organization. They did not, they were in the organization. To us, I think the most important thing that a group of neighborhood kids, gangsters had gotten together and formed political organizations to serve the community. And here we are, college students. And if gangs can organize a community and have breakfast programs, lunch programs, what would stop us from doing things that were important to us like learning our culture, making it easier for other people to learn.

Pam Sporn [25:07]  
Why did you demonstration about the President? Why did you say that President Peck was lying? What was that about? Can you tell me, was that when Black, Puerto Rican and White students occupied the President's Office was this in 1969?

Antonio Nieves It wasn't '69, we were trying to institute our demands, and the school was saying no. And so when we talk about our culture and our history, that we

have a right to our culture and our history, the President was denying us by denying our demands. And so we were calling him a liar. And we were saying, you know, this is what we want. And I think that even before the students were arrested, there was a lot of activity, there were fires on campus, there was, there was civil unrest on campus, fire alarms were turned on. The philosophy then was if the school doesn't work for everybody, it works for nobody. It wasn't working for Blacks and Puerto Ricans, it wasn't gonna work for anybody. So the goal was to shut the school down and get them to listen to our demands. And when the raid came in May, and they arrested us. I think that it may have brought a lot more people into the fold. But there was, if you look at the photographs from that time, and the tapes of that time, you'll see that there's a lot of people on campus demonstrating so we had a lot of support. But I think more came after we were arrested, like Orlando said.

Pam Sporn Can you remember that? Can you describe that moment, can you describe what happened?

Antonio Nieves Which moment is that?

Pam Sporn When the BC 19 were arrested?

Antonio Nieves Well, it was very traumatic. I'll say that. From what happened, what other people have told me about their activity or what happened in their house, from my house, they came into my house.

Pam Sporn I'm sorry, could you say, I mean, say who they is. I'm sorry. Just start again and say whose they?

Antonio Nieves (background audio) It was the police, what was the question?

Pam Sporn Oh, tell me what happened. You say it was very dramatic when you were arrested in the BC 19. You were telling me when the police arrived at your house.

Antonio Nieves So the police. I was, I was studying for my exams. I normally study at night. So I was studying till 5:30 in the morning. I'd just left my house to go around the block to go to my mother's house to get something to eat. I saw the police cars coming around the corner, I went to my mother's house and had my crackers and tea went to sleep. Meanwhile, the police came to my house, they came, they unlocked the front door. They came in with vest. It was a typical thing that they were doing during then, the pre dawn raids. They came in with several policemen, they came in with vest shotguns. They went into the house they arrested all the male members of the house. I remember (...) was telling me that he woke up with a flashlight and in his eyes and a policeman put a shotgun in his face and he

was laying in bed and he just, he said they asked him are you Antonio Nieves, he just slapped the shotgun away and said, no, I gotta go to work in the morning. I'm not him.

Anyway, so they arrested every all the males in the house. And for the other members of the, of the organization. They Orlando's family was, his sisters were arrested, his mother was arrested. This happened in other people's houses. Since they arrested 19 of us. Only two of us did not get arrested me and Larry Sparks and because I had just left the house. Was it traumatic? Yes. And then the next day, or that day when, when they were being arraigned, I was going to the courthouse to see what the charges were. They had already arrested everybody. And when I got there, somebody told me, you can't go into because they're looking for you. And they're going to, you know, you're looking at 251 years in jail. And so the charges were riot in the first degree, riot in the second degree, riot in the third degree, incite to riot in the first degree, secondary arson in the first degree, second degree, criminal mischief in the second degree, first degree conspiracy to conspire, in the first degree and second degree. So yeah, I was a little nervous. But this is something that we had decided that we were going to do, no matter what the consequences were. The people in the organization were committed to sacrificing whatever they needed sacrifice to make sure that we had Puerto Rican Studies and Afro-American Studies, and we were taught our true history, and not the propaganda or the stuff that was made up and fed to us.

Pam Sporn

[30:08]

Those are tremendously harsh charges for college students. That's crazy.

Antonio Nieves

It was crazy. And there's no way I was gonna do 151 years, but it was, what it was. And it didn't matter if it was 500 years, you know, everybody that was involved in the organization and was working for Black Studies and Puerto Rican Studies was committed.

Pam Sporn

How did it actually win the Puerto Rican Studies Institute, how was it actually, what made the final push to get that approved?

Antonio Nieves

Well, I think that after the case was going on for, went on for about a year. And so the students that were arrested, the unrest on the campus stopped. In September, the demands were presented again to the to the school, the school started instituting them. I think that the school knew that if they didn't institute these demands, that everything was going to start all over again, that the people will, not only was the initial core group committed, but now the whole student body was committed to it. And they were pushing for it. And when we were arrested, money had to be raised. I think that the women in the organization went out and raised money. People put up their houses for collateral. But I think, I always say this all, most of the

time, my philosophy is the backbone of an organization is women in the organization, because most of the men were arrested. So most of the women in the organization took up the struggle of supporting us, and you know, carrying on the information. But that's my bias.

Pam Sporn

So the Institute's were established because of the immense pressure of the student body.

Antonio Nieves

That's correct. I mean, there were certain things that they couldn't institute. Some of the demands were again symbolic was what the word I was looking for, like the war in Vietnam. I don't know if the racist professor that, that was mentioned earlier, if he was ever ousted. But yes, they set up, they set up a program for the Puerto Rican, they also set up a program for admissions of more Blacks and Puerto Ricans and eventually, the free admissions, Open Admissions is what it was called, it wasn't free admission, it was Open Admission. Open Admission was not for just Blacks and Puerto Ricans, Open Admission was for everybody. We wanted Blacks and Whites, Puerto Ricans, and whatever minority you were, whatever color you were, we wanted everybody to have an equal opportunity in the schools, because the end goal of that is that education will open up your mind. And an educated society can control its own destiny. And that's what we were looking for. We were looking to educate the masses and educate to the Puerto Rican and Black communities and everybody else who would listen so they would see what was really going on in life. So education is the key to success. One of my other idioms

Tami Gold,

(background audio) That whole thing sounds very traumatic, and scary. When you went home, people told you not to go in and what did you do? Did you run away from the city? Because I would have, did you go into hiding? I mean, I would have freaked out. Like, what did you leave town?

Antonio Nieves

Well, the first thing I did was go to the courthouse because I wanted, I was gonna sit in court, listen to them, because they didn't have my picture so they didn't know what I looked like. But I was, as I got closer to the courthouse, they had put out, they had send out runners, because they knew what I was going to do. My organization send out runners and told me to disappear. And so I disappeared. I went underground for maybe a week. That's not a long time. Was I scared? No. I wasn't scared. My, I went to my girlfriend's house, and her mother said, is this you in the Daily News. I was like, yeah, that's me. Because they had an arrest warrant for me. At some point I was worried about if I walked the streets would a policeman recognize me, so I went up to a policeman and asked him for directions. He didn't know who I was, so I felt comfortable.

[34:58]

So I hit out, I had some friends that took care of me and they insisted I stay inside. But after a week, I had talked to my lawyer. The lawyers that we had was, Mr. Mercer, senior and (...) was one of our lawyers. And so I gave myself up, to the to my lawyer, and he took me into the police station so I spent three days at Rikers Island, till I was bailed out. That was an experience. But it wasn't a bad experience for me. I've been institutionalized, before I was in an orphanage for like five or six years so I already know how institutions function. So and I had read Malcolm X on how he dealt with jail. So when I went to jail, I just connected to some people that were doing martial arts, and I worked out on the floor with them. So basically, nobody really bothered me. I called it a vacation. At Rikers three days.

Pam Sporn

So looking back, we're commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Puerto Rican Studies Department, and all the work that you guys did to win that and Black Studies. Looking back, what is the most important thing to you? And what have you carried from those days to now, in terms of how, what you've committed your life to? What's been the influence of being involved in that, that struggle?

Antonio Nieves

Well, I was always proud that we had gotten Open Admissions, I was proud to, when I would look back, and I would think about what I was doing at that particular time in my life, I would look back and I was like, well, you did something, you help educate people, you know. Now people are going to college and people are getting educated and have better opportunities, and they can make better decisions. And so I was happy about that. I was not aware that after seven years Open Admissions was done away with. I was also, when I left Brooklyn College, I went to Howard University School of Pharmacy. And so I was concentrating on my studies, because I realized that in order to be an effective member of the community, you also had to have a degree, you also have to have some power, that being involved in political movements and not getting an education and not having any power behind your voice was important, so I went to finish my education. And once I finished my education, then I started working as a Pharmacist in the community. And my, my necessity, I have a need to serve the community. I don't know where it comes from, maybe it comes from my mother, maybe comes from my Christian background, maybe it comes from my political background. So now I was a Pharmacist and I was serving the community in terms of giving, delivering health, health care. So that filled a void for me, because I need to be working in the community and hopefully doing something to make things better for everybody else.

Tami Gold

I have a few questions. Why were you turned down when you first applied to...

Antonio Nieves      The reason I was turned down, is because I had horrible grades, horrible grades when I was in high school. And when I was in elementary school, P.S. 47. and then I went to Erasmus. They were never really interested in educating us, they were babysitting. You know, my teacher told me, told the class, I'm going to teach you guys you can either listen or not listen, either way, I'm going to get paid. Education wasn't a priority in schools. Just being there, babysitting was the priority. I don't know if I answered your question.

Tami Gold            Why do you think we went to a school all Puerto Rican? Was it race based?

Antonio Nieves      The first school I went to was P.S. 47 and I think there was many Blacks and Puerto Ricans because it was a Black and Puerto Rican community in Park Slope on Fourth Avenue and Dean street and when the second school I went to, Walt Whitman was predominantly Jewish, and Erasmus was predominantly Jewish, and I forgot the question already.

Tami Gold            Well, did they single out not educating you because you're Puerto Rican?

Antonio Nieves      [39:51]  
No, I think it was the whole education system was, was okay. I believe that when I was in school, the education system in New York City was not really geared toward educating people but more babysitting students. I was in a, when I lived in Brooklyn, it was a ghetto , the high school was a ghetto school. We had hot and cold running prostitutes and junkies in the neighborhood. The school wasn't really geared toward educating but more babysitting. When I went off into, into high school and junior high school, they will good schools, Erasmus was a good school Whitman was a good school. But I don't think that, they were particularly interested in teaching the Third World students, what they needed to know if you didn't, my mother had a third grade education so to her me just being at school was a big thing. And she always, my mother always stressed that, you should get educated and you should go to college and she was always pushing me to go to school. But the schools were not interested in basically teaching you anything.

Tami Gold            You mentioned that your brother was in the Du Bois club. Can you explain to Pam, what's the Du Bois club?

Antonio Nieves      W.E.B. Du Bois Club was a, was an Afro-American and some of the things that he espoused was if you, you have to help yourself, nobody's going to help you. You have to develop your own economic base. And so there was a communist organization that decided to take his name. And they were, I thought they would just Brooklyn based but they were New York based, my brother was the chapter, the head chapter, e he was in

charge of the Brooklyn chapter of the W.E.B. Du Bois club. And I don't know if I had too much, I didn't do too much, I didn't do anything with the boys club other than know that my brother was a member.

Pam Sporn Did he talk about what happened in the Du Bois club while in the house?

Antonio Nieves Well in the house we always, we always had talked about. My house was on Bergen Street was an open house and so we would have people from the community come in. And it would be always constant polemics 'till two, three o'clock in the morning, people would sit around, drink tea and crackers, and smoke their cigarettes and drink their beer and wine and we'd discuss politics 'till two, three o'clock in the morning and that was the usual thing on my house. And it was because of my brother Dito and my brother, Robert.

Pam Sporn Exciting times. Seems like it was very rich and inspiring. How old were you when this was going on?

Antonio Nieves Just turning 18, turning 19 though, and that's a an incomplete sentence. Sorry.

Pam Sporn I'm getting tapped on the back to ask you to repeat that. So you're 18 and all these vibrant political discussions are happening in your house? Could you tell me that?

Antonio Nieves We were talking about racism and talked about racism in the society? What racism represented, we talked about Jim Crow...

Pam Sporn Could you just, I'm sorry to interrupt, you could just step back and say I was 18, and in the house where this vibrant political discussions going on.

Antonio Nieves I was 16 and my house we used to have vibrant political discussions. We'd sit around the kitchen till two, three o'clock in the morning and talk about racism. We would talk about the war in Vietnam, which was prevalent. My brother Dito was inducted to the army and he told him that if he, if they took them in the army, he would organize the soldiers. So they would shoot at the US government and not at the Vietnamese. They took my brother Robert from the W.E.B. Du Bois club, and they wanted him to join the army, he said he wouldn't go, I was inducted I went to Fort Hamilton, I went to Fort Hamilton for my induction test and they wanted me to swear allegiance to the United States and I told them I wouldn't, that I will take the Fourth Amendment and they was like, that's the wrong amendment. The guy said it's the fifth amendment, I was like, alright, I'll take that one. So I wouldn't pledge allegiance to the United States, they inducted me anyway. I was supposed to report to the military but in my household when I was younger, there was a lot of political emphasis, so we talked

about racism. We talked about colonialism. We talked about Allende, we talked about the war in Vietnam, we talked about Palestine, we talked about racism. We talked about Malcolm X, we talked about Martin Luther King, we talked about women's struggle. We talked about, a little bit about the gay struggle because the gay struggle was just coming into its own. But everything was discussed at home, and everything was fair game.

Tami Gold

[45:01]

You mentioned that there was a cc, a Central Committee?

Antonio Nieves

The Central Committee for P.R.A. and the Central Committee for Black League of Afro-American Collegians. P.R.S being Puerto Rican Alliance. We coordinated with the organizations and the organization decided what actions were going to be taken, whether it was to block Boylan Hall, whether it was to have a demonstration and burn a pig's head, whether it was to pull the fire alarms, whether it was to shut down the school, whatever was needed to shut down the school to draw attention to the 18 demands that we wanted, 21 demands, excuse me.

Tami Gold

How are they elected? How did the Central Committee, were you on the Central Committee and did you get elected?

Antonio Nieves

I was on the Central Committee for Puerto Rican Alliance and Black League of Afro-American Collegians. How is the committee elected, the committee was elected by the membership of the organization. The organization voted who they wanted for President, Vice President and we would make decisions and bring it down to the organization and discuss it with the organization. And at some point, the organization got together after we came from California and decided what activity we wanted to have.

Tami Gold

You mentioned earlier Puerto Ricans with thrown off the roofs? Can you elaborate, who is throwing Puerto Ricans off the roof?

Antonio Nieves

Oh, the police department were at that particular point. Or that particular time in history, the police department were committing a lot of atrocities against the third world people, against third world people. Afro-American people the Black Panther Party was getting shot in their beds. People, the Young Lords, I don't know if the member, the young man who was thrown off the roof was he a member of the Young Lords, he may have been or he may have been somebody from the Young Lords who was killed in the in the jail at Rikers. But there was, they murdering third world people. They were killing Puerto Ricans and they were killing Blacks, indiscriminately. And so you can either go sit back and do nothing or you could stand up and fight. And the people that I would, that I was with wanted to stand up

the fight. And they were not going to kowtow to anybody. It was our way or the highway.

Tami Gold

Where you proud?

Antonio Nieves

Am I proud? I'm proud of the accomplishments that we that we were able to bring to fruition. I was happy that I wasn't, I didn't have to kill anybody in that period of time. But I'd never expected to make it past 25. And so everybody who was involved in the organization, were actually taking their lives in their hands and putting their lives at risk and their family's lives at risk. They were, when we were in the court, the DA wanted to hear from somebody to admit to something 'cause everybody was not admitting to anything. They wanted to clear their names. The DA had just invaded 21 people's houses in pre-dawn raids with shotguns and squads of policemen and guns drawn and so they had to have some, some reason for legitimizing what they had done. We did, we did take actions on the campus that we thought would bring us, bring us what we wanted. And we were willing to take those chances people willing to die at that time, people were willing to sacrifice their lives at that time. And I think that's what it took to, to get us to where we are today or to get us to the 21 demands and having somethings instituted like Puerto Rican Studies and Afro-American Studies and learning more about our history and who we were.

Tami Gold

Today, are you happy with where things are today?

Antonio Nieves

No.

Tami Gold

Education and education, educating young Puerto Ricans and young Dominicans and African Americans, their history, (background audio).  
Last question.

Antonio Nieves

[49:50]

Am I happy with where things are today? No, I'm not happy with where things are today because we're back where we were before. We're back 50 years back. What have we accomplished? There are less Puerto Ricans in college now, than they were back when I was there. You know, all the things that we fought for they've been pushed back, Black people still getting killed on the streets and shot in the streets like dogs, yes. Are Puerto Ricans being discriminated, yes. Now, you know, the only thing I didn't mention was the Chavez struggle, the Grape struggle and the migrant workers, you know, what are they going through? America is supposed to be inclusive. The only thing I want America to do is to live up to its values, I was taught American values, the values that I learned in this country are the values that I expect America to stand up for, and if it doesn't stand up for that, then I'm willing to call it to call it a task. If

America is not going to represent everybody and give freedom to everybody that I'm willing to call it a task, if I have to sacrifice my life to do that, that then I'm willing to do that also. I'm not putting up with inequalities and inequities that I've been promised that would not exist in America. So freedom for all, equality for all or nobody has any rest. That's my philosophy.

[End of recorded material at 51:06]