

Interview with: Juan Colón (translation)

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Side A

003: He was born in Gurabo in 1950. "My father was a carpenter, he was a bricklayer, he was a machinist. My mother worked in a factory when the factories began to move to PR through Operation...Bootstrap. Which the government of Muñoz Marín established on the island, so many Puerto Rican women who normally would devote themselves to being housewives and to bringing up their children, were kind of liberating themselves...so they began to form part of the labor force."

014: They were 6 children, 4 boys, 2 sisters. Part of the labor force too until they emigrated to the US. They worked in a factory where they processed tobacco, part of the Consolidated Cigar Corporation. "Which then later left PR, and they recruited active workers who...came as braceros to work on the farms here in Connecticut, Massachusetts."

023: His family came here in '64. "My father worked for Colt and Royal Typewriter... They employed a great many people from Htfd."

028: My father had come to Htfd once. He came with a group of migrants. Since my father knew English...they recruited him in PR to be like a crew leader for...those who came here. So then he came, he got to know Htfd, and he liked it...[he was a crew leader] in tobacco, nurseries, all that...The crew leaders at least were in charge of the administrative part of the camps, since my father...had gone to school and he had graduated from high school []...university, and knew English besides. So he was the kind of person that they needed at the time because the PRs who migrated during that era had very little language skill."

038: During that era the jobs were also very plentiful. Because at that time Hartford having [] as big as Colt was...Royal, Underwood...Factories that were quite large, the Arrowheart Electric Company...I also worked at Arrowheart...I had to lie about my age...I began to work relatively young, at about 15, while I went to school."

044: [full time] "The first factory in which I worked...around 1965 was called Futuramic Industries, it was a factory that processed plastic parts, for coffeemakers and things like that. One of the best salaries, 1.50 per hour...medical benefits...It symbolized at least a huge change as far as when you came from Puerto Rico where they paid a dollar per hour..."

051: [his parents decided to come because of that and because] "Unemployment in PR was quite high because at that time in spite of the fact that the statistics showed that the unemployment was

around 20 percent, it was the figure that the Labor Dept utilized, but if we go to certain places at least...unemployment was at 40, 50 percent. And as the construction industry which was what my father worked in most wasn't...at its height, because the factories that were going to be there were already built...Well so he had a chance that...coming to the United States, at least he would be able to better provide for the family."

059: His father was named Ramon Colon, mother is Luz Maria Ramos. During the time that his father returned to PR, then his mother [came to CT] two years later. They left and the children stayed behind. JC stayed behind and continued going to school "When I was 16 I worked full time and I studied full time. I had ambitions...Around the age of 17 I remember that in Hartford there was a company called General Cinema Corporation, and since I was very fluent in the art of the language...at least dealing with numbers...they made me a manager...at the time when there were drive-in theaters...before, in Htfd and Windsor...until afterwards I went full time to the University of Connecticut." He graduated as a health educator, and he took the police exam.

081: But Esther Jimenez, who was Maria Sanchez's comadre, [was] the one who ran the Community Renewal Team, South Green office, south side of Htfd. She told him about a health educator job in Windsor. "I went to coordinate health programs for the migrants. It was the first health program that they had in the tobacco camps here in CT...It served the workers of MA and CT, a comprehensive health program...run by a hospital with about 50 beds, they gave hospitalization service and all the medical services...And from there that was when my career began to change. There was a bicameral commission in Puerto Rico that came here, and they saw the conditions...how the PRs lived. And I wasn't very happy with the way that the PRs, the migrants, not...only PRs, now there were migrants from Jamaica, there were migrants from the South, there were other...immigrants from Mexico, and the conditions weren't the best...I got into a dialogue with them...with the people who came from PR, legislators and senators, blaming them of course for the fact that the conditions in which the PRs here lived took place under their auspices."

105: They told him to change things, they made him director when he was 22, he was there for 10 years, director of the Migration Division, an office directly linked with the governor of PR. Before it was a migration division within the department of PR itself, law 87, the guaranteed job contract, minimum salary, adequate living conditions, medical services, and the rest of the things that they had a right to have. The Htfd division was created in '48, he was there till he went to Miami and he lived there until [the time that] they stole the money from Wells Fargo.

122: [the agricultural workers' conditions] "They were often very poor. For example the type of cabin...the cold seeped right through it, the running water was erratic, the mattresses were...very bad. They didn't have any way to socialize because they were completely isolated...In fact when they left, they thought that they were escaping, as if they were prisoners...In fact one of the things that I also saw when I came into the office of PR was that...I assured them that they weren't prisoners, and therefore they weren't escaping...they had the right to enter [?] when they wanted to. But the impression that they had was that they were there under obligation to the bosses to be there...And they thought that there would be severe repercussions if they left without the bosses' permission...They thought that they were going to put them in jail, that they were going to deport them."

139: "Let's say that for example after a person came he got sick, he couldn't do the work, but what they did was repatriate them, they didn't deport them, rather they let them return to their house and the bosses were responsible for paying their airfare, to pay their basic expenses... They thought that way because then there were the Dominicans, they were being deported."

145: "I remember one time that-- I lived in Htfd, and some of them were pretty much crying, they didn't want to be in the camp and they say to me, well, we're going to tell you the truth, we're going to escape. Escape?... But you're not in jail, how are you going to escape? No, we have family in Htfd and... we're waiting for nightfall so we can leave. I said, [] to Htfd, do you want to go with me? They say, you would do it? You're not going to get in trouble? And I [], no one can force you, the only thing is that [] have a debt to the boss, if you pay him, it's fine, the cost of the fare, because... when the bosses here recruited you, they paid your fare so you could come here. But... in the first few payments [of wages] they reimbursed the bosses for the fare. If for example they were at the time--they completely finished the contract, they would return what you paid them... and the cost of the fare to go back to PR besides." But he explained that all they had to do was pay the debt, their only legal obligation, but that no one could force them to stay against their will, they were American citizens, they had all the rights of any citizen.

160: "And to their surprise, well, I brought them, I took them to the house... They were amazed, they thought that probably I was going to bring them back to the camp... Afterwards... many of them began to come, because they had friends, they had family... relatives that lived in Htfd... because the PR population at that time wasn't so big. It wasn't like now that they're living all over the place. Remember that in those days the PRs were not very accepted either in... many parts of the city... They had to look for rentals in areas where there was no problem and they weren't seen as a threat to everyone else."

170: "The greatest concentration of PRs, they were concentrated where... Htfd's downtown... Columbus Blvd, where the gas company is and all that. Front St, which doesn't even exist now, that was the original Puerto Rican area, and of course Main St. Main St. Well, they could be from Park St to the whole North End. They tried to move at least further north in Htfd like Wethersfield Ave, Franklin Ave, where the majority were Italians or Irish. They weren't well accepted... If you were a light-skinned Puerto Rican, since we have all colors, and you moved you could be []. When you said that you... were Puerto Rican, they had to at least treat you with respect because if not, everyone had to fight."

185: "To say that in the South End... of course racism existed, and there was segregation and of course [rarely] they had the signs that this is white people only... I didn't go through that experience here... Possibly if you were a dark-skinned Puerto Rican you'd probably have some trouble going into some places, although they didn't say it up front because the northern states are a little more liberal than the southern states. But they looked at a man superficially [*lo miraron un poco por encima del hombre*] as we say in Puerto Rico. And I assume that at least in order to let a man into a restaurant, [] a little more time than if he had been a white person."

198: [his father's work as a foreman] "He told stories once in a while about what he did, for example when he had to intervene in some dispute between some of the workers with some of the supervisors... I remember that once... an anecdote... there was this PR man who said that the supervisor was driving him crazy. At noon... it seemed that he was bothering him, that they went to lunch and he began insulting [them]... And my father went to check out what [] was

happening. And he spoke to the supervisor, look, the people are upset because they believe that at 12 when they go to eat it bothers you and you begin to insult all of them. He says but they don't understand what I'm saying... No, that... it was a religion, like... the Quakers, and he, well, prayed at 12 in German. And it sounded so, so ugly and with some strange sounds that the PR workers thought that it was that he was insulting them." But it was a way of saying grace.

222: His father's work in the factories: "Soldering... parts... I don't remember what that type of job was called but it was like spot welding... In fact I [] during the summer, I worked at Royal and I did the same thing. [Royal's conditions] ... The environment at Royal was quite friendly. Because they saw the PRs in the factories here as good workers... and the opportunities were there, for example... the companies that employed quite a lot of PRs, which were Colt, Underwood, that was also a typewriter factory, and Royal. All of these factories had many Puerto Rican employees. And they were treated well... There was no disparity."

237: "When I went in [to work], I was already 18 so I could go in with a larger group [?]. I went to Arrowheart Electric Company... []. And it was one of the best paying [factories] at that time and they paid 3 dollars and 14 cents per hour... That was a good salary.. You paid 30 dollars for rent... every month. You could buy 5 Coca Colas for 79 cents. You could buy 2 chickens for 50 cents... it was a very good salary, it gave you enough to buy a car and all of that." He bought a car in his mother's name, it was an Impala. PRs have always liked Chevrolets. He had one of those dogs in the back [that bobs its head]. "It had those Hollywood mufflers... to [] noise... that's what we liked... it's called low riders... it was a muffler that had a very strange sound, that's what was in at that time. [they rode around Park St looking at girls] Oh, definitely, that was one of the Puerto Ricans' sports, to go to Park St, Colt Park, and Pope Park. And Charter Oak Terrace, of course, because Charter Oak Terrace was the place where you had at least the best looking Puerto Rican girls... Rice Heights, where at least if you look it [] no longer exists, nor will it come back." Part of the new govt formula is to get rid of the public housing projects as we know them and now they're living spaces better suited to family reunification and greater social change, before it was like a concentration camp, putting all the poor people in one place.

280: [the bldgs on Columbus, Front, etc] "They were brownstones, brick. Some were 3 family houses.. The stores were all located in the Main St area... These were only residences... [] play dominoes on the porch in the back. There were family parties that [] the aguinaldos... [] roast pig... the 3 o'clock coffee [? *El café de las tres*]... It was really nice... Since there weren't so many of us either, I would imagine that at that time there were about 10,000 PRs living around there." There were parrandas in the streets, "Maria Sanchez and a group of us went from house to house doing the parrandas when Christmas came... We would get together where Julian's restaurant was... There was a parranda and we would have a party right there."

304: "The majority of Htfd's PRs are from the areas of Comerio, Caguas, and Gurabo, and it's still that way. For example, if we go to other towns such as... Meriden, the PRs there are from the areas of Aguada and Añasco... If you go to Bgt there are a lot from the area of the mountains of Las Marias and that area... Each group clustered in different areas... And also the question was relative [?] because if you for example knew someone from your town, [?] of course where you would at least know somebody. And the whole family would begin to gather... and someone who came from Gurabo, had family in Caguas, so... from Caguas they had family members who were living in Comerio. And that's how [] constantly migrating. Until today."

316: And a large portion of the... migration [was that of?] the farmworkers, because on one occasion I remember that in '74 or somewhere in there, there were around 10,000 PRs trying out the farms in CT and MA... They called it... Connecticut's Tobacco Valley... from there, from the Windsor area... up to Deerfield... Ma. There were smaller bosses [farmers] who had vegetables, they were in the areas of VT, NH, and MA, also RI, we also served them from the office of Puerto Rico here in Htfd."

327: "Some of the bosses provided very inhumane conditions. I remember one who woke the boys in the morning... with a rifle, that was... the alarm clock... in the area of [] MA... I didn't believe it, one day I went, as a matter of fact [?]. I made arrangements for the boys who left the camp and broke the contracts... And they grew to a labor force that was quite []. They also negotiated some salaries that were comparable to the minimum wage that they paid here, because in spite of the fact that the wages were comparable, they weren't... like the minimum wage that they paid unskilled workers in the CT area... And coming from [?] PR you are looking for a way to raise the [] wage to a level equal to the minimum wage because CT paid a few cents more than what was the federal minimum wage. And well the Shade Tobacco Growers were the main company that brought the workers. They didn't want to negotiate. And for 2 cents they wouldn't sign the contract. So that's where the agricultural pgm in PR died. Afterwards some people came who at least knew the bosses... but they came without the protection of the contract. If something happened to them, well, we couldn't go in to protect them, nor could we []."

354: "Afterwards they came and created an amendment so that they brought... the PRs to work in apples [orchards]. The PRs... when it comes to [] vegetables, tobacco, everything that comes from the earth, the Puerto Rican has trouble at least with everything that has to do with picking fruit from a tree and that kind of thing, the Puerto Rican doesn't like that very much. So they began to bring what they called domestic workers because normally they were Jamaicans, those who had picked the apples... and the govt of PR was forced by court order, the bosses here had to bring PRs who... were considered citizens, and not bring foreign workers... and they brought a number of groups of PRs to work in apples... but it didn't work out. After there were there for like 2 or 3 days well, they left and all that... That program also died because then... since they knew that whatever happened some Puerto Ricans were going to come and... many of the PRs came here to work in tobacco, and in the orchards, the nurseries, well, the govt of PR amended Law 87, so then they created Law 54 which then allowed the workers to come... every month... the federal govt created some positions... that were called federal monitor advocates, where they were in charge of protecting the workers, based on the same rule, that applied to [] the workers here in the United States [under the NLRB} Then they didn't come protected by a contract negotiated by the Labor Dept... Under this law they were allowed to at least have the same rights, if they had some problem they could make the same demands [] as the workers here."

387: "The agricultural contract basically died around '75, it had to have been [the new law] in '76, '77. There weren't too many women working in tobacco, there were many students, also Afro-Americans who lived in the South. Women didn't work on the farms. You would see them in the sheds where they were putting the tobacco up to dry... and taking out the stems... in the middle... It was afterwards that you began to see more women working in tobacco but not as migrants, Puerto Rican women only came to work in tobacco, there were 2 years, they came through Consolidated Cigar. But they were women who were working in the factories back in

PR. So they would bring them during the summer to work on the farms here processing the tobacco... And that was... I would say around '76, '77 also... It was a special contract, it wasn't the same contract negotiated by the department of labor... the dept of labor did have to do with those that they brought, but they were supported more by a number of federal guarantees. They were there in the summer for 2 consecutive years and... they went back... as a result of the camp conditions they were-- the women [] much better. They were camps [] with students working there as well, and the conditions were very good... They were even better as summer camps... The camps were very clean, they had all the facilities, they had a recreation area and everything."

426: [the groups that tried to organize the workers?] "ATA... La Asociacion de Trabajadores Agricolas [the Tobacco Workers' Association] of New England... Yes, I remember them well, they picketed me. There was Juan Irrizarry, a good person in fact... I would say that all Puerto Ricans, although they always deny it, they always carry inside them a flame of independence... and many times they don't [] it for obvious reasons, but I like my people to be alive, awake, fighting for their brothers' rights. So for that reason although I didn't openly show myself to be in favor of the movements, neither did I place myself against them. I believe that those movements help to raise the consciousness of the people more, with respect to [] the need of the people, and they helped to make it easier for other people who had to organize the workers. Because... Chavez with the lettuce... in California, he was one of the people who influenced the birth of ATA here, that was a big influence among the PRs. We at least let them know that they also had the right to negotiate a contract for themselves. It helped them to fight for other rights that usually they would believe they didn't have. So that's how the movement was good, they picketed me many times and all that, and at times I came to the office to find a picket line outside. Eugenio Caro was there, Alejandro La Luz was there, Jose La Luz, everyone from that movement. But I invited them inside if it was cold... I remember also one time I was outside and there were all the television cameras waiting for me to arrive because... the person that I replaced [Gilberto Camacho] well he was very Republican, to the extreme right, and when he saw the independence movements... He wasn't very happy."

463: Of all the parties what I liked, I excused that part, I had no reason to refuse or toss everything aside, and when I arrived, well, they were there with the cameras waiting for me to at least react to the contrary... I went in [], they say to me, listen, what do you think about what's happening there outside? What's happening outside? Those people? Oh, [] I went to work, they say to me, how can you work with that noise, I say, noise, that [] noise? Those are my people demonstrating, I like all that... They packed up the cameras and they left."

482: "It was Gilberto Camacho who didn't like it. When there were those pickets, ay, those insolent [], Communists... But... I could develop my convictions and my political philosophy outside the influence of... the Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico, it was easy for me to adapt, and I could see the issues involved in the independence movement. I do think that everyone has the right at least to be free... Everyone has the right to think however they want... For example the way to make themselves heard was through the pickets... so be it."

498: "In fact there was a time when... Peter Levassy [sp?] was the one who ran the Greater Hartford Process. Edna Negron... Someone got to her a hidden memorandum that they had. An extremely confidential memorandum of how they had conceived a plan to... dismantle the PR communities of Htfd. They already had a plan for where the blacks were going to go, where the

PRs were going to go, the way they were going to completely displace them. And the memorandum, well, somebody made a copy and it got to the community. In spite of the fact [?] that everyone on the Committee of 24 with Eugenio Caro, the Socialists, the independentistas... picketed, that we surrounded the Htfd Civic Center for the first time. I was one of the people picketing also. So that's how you have to first look at your principles as a human being, as a Puerto Rican, as people aware of the problem... Everyone's going to have philosophical differences... It was a question of us focusing on the real problem... together... On many occasions the community couldn't organize themselves behind something specific."

526: [after the memorandum] "There were the apologies... and it died completely, so the preconceived plan was completely dismantled... But we had a good turnout, like around 10,000 Puerto Ricans, hand in hand completely surrounding the Civic Center of the city of Htfd, so that's how we showed that in terms of numbers we were powerful. If at least... we had voted on that night, we would have gotten the whole city hall and the entire Htfd administration." He wouldn't say that the city administration was behind the plan, but "the Greater Htfd Process was an entity of the city itself... although they weren't sponsoring openly what they were planning, you can be sure that they in some way or other knew about the plan... The PR community in fact in that time was clustering in those areas and showing itself to be a powerful group. The easiest way to avoid us being able to reach political power was to take us apart, like fragmentation and so at least we would succeed in getting any power. And they can't even elect their own representatives."

551: "One of the biggest protests in which I participated was when we got together with the Afro-American community and... we had a march to the extreme south, to the heart of the Italian community and the Irish community of Htfd, which was in the Maple Ave area, that whole area, because they told us that we couldn't go there. And we [], we're going to go, oh, well, if you come here, we're going to fight you [?]. And a group of Afro-Americans and Puerto Ricans that marched to the heart of where that church was and there we gave our speeches and [had] our demonstrations. And we moved there too." At the beginning of the '80s. "Even though you couldn't see it so clearly, but always... resentment has always existed because people see us [as people who] come to a place and then we're going to live off everyone else, we're going to create a slum, a ghetto... and well, at whatever cost we were going to try to find the way for us to enter their communities. And so although the issue of discrimination and racism wasn't that obvious but it did exist. In fact I remember during the '60s there was a large gang that was whites only... They were called the Comancheros. The Comancheros all got together in the []... one time some PRs said, fine, if we go we're going to make those people respect us [or] they'll continue abusing us. And a large group of PRs got together and we at least had to defend our territory... And a fight began between the gang and the PR people that were there and eventually they left the area, they stopped getting together there, and so then the Comancheros lost the power that they had had... they had controlled all the people who came to that area, who could go to those bars, who could go into the poolhalls... Eventually the PRs exercised their power and got them out of the area. That was also in the '60s, somewhere around there."

610: '67 riots. "They began to say that the PRs had brought the cockroaches to Htfd... In the Htfd historic record there were some articles... where they claimed that the PRs had brought the cockroaches to Htfd. And that's how one got started. And then well some disturbances began where they had like 3 days of fire, a total race riot [*manifestacion*]. They turned over a car... Extra police were brought in, they shot, they threw tear gas, they burned buildings. That

was in '67...One of the demonstrations that had been a bit violent. The only violent one that I've seen in Htfd at least that I remember. That had the PRs directly involved in it. And of course afterwards the Afro-American community, I don't think emotionally but more because they had the chance to go into the stores and rob them, looting and all that...Many of the youth also went in, it was a party and all that...They came in not because of the same principles nor because of the same issues but more because they were young people too and they said good, we're going to participate in this."

643: "But it was...an era when the community...began to develop, and there at least they began to focus on other areas, the question of political power. Instead of fighting the Establishment from outside, why not from inside, they began to look for ways to include PRs on the commissions, which were really what controlled [] areas. And the decisions that they make now at least when...this movement of professionals was...at its peak, because teachers were coming from Puerto Rico. By then at least the bilingual issue wasn't only Title 1, but rather it was Title 7, bilingual/bicultural, and Maria Sanchez and a group of educators from here went to PR. They began to recruit PR teachers so that the type of PRs who you saw were also more educated. Although we had some at least we had [] and all that [] so for that reason we got emerged [*saliarnos*]. The professional community made themselves felt more. Lawyers came...some doctors...It wasn't limited to Hartford but also was in East Htfd, Windsor, South Windsor. And now there are Puerto Ricans around from that time period that I think don't even speak Spanish. Because they are completely integrated in the community and they have lost a great deal of their history."

687: [formal politics] "Almost always there was at least...a neighborhood captain who was more prominent at least because he controlled more votes...Always [] Maria Sanchez, because Maria Sanchez was the first one who really entered the political machinery. She succeeded at least in getting onto the board of education. She was elected on her merits, not because she was appointed...One of the things that we created, for example...The Puerto Rican Democratic Club, which was an entity that we created at least to ask for funds in order to at least endorse our own candidates...We began to become active inside politics, fundraising activities...then we at least had some money that we could use to support campaigns of the people who responded to our concerns...We created coalitions, the Afro-American and Puerto Rican coalition. We created coalitions with the whites in the south [end] as well. It was a question of at least having representation...from all the areas, until at least we could fill the political posts with our own people. That was where Mildred [Torres] came in...I think that it was Barbara Kennelly when [] the seat. So then they supported Mildred getting in. She was the first one who got on the city council. Afterwards [] several...Gerry Zayas, Tony Gonzalez came along, that in fact I was the chairman of Tony Gonzalez's campaign, who was the first one that came in that we elected by the people at large. And from there the rest followed."

Side B

010: [the bilingual prgm] [was] created by federal law so they had to accept it. "The thing was because of the ingredients that...made the program move forward...There has always been opposition by the Anglo-Saxon community when it comes to the bilingual program...[] the person that comes to the United States...has to do like the Americans, and they think at least that it's away of 'spoil[ing] the Puerto Rican community.'" They still haven't succeeded in making

the same place, because they are used to having family close by. Those who have relocated outside of Htfd, many have returned. The same pattern applies to Stowe Village.

145: He visited Manchester, many complaints about some duplex houses. A compadre moved to one apt, the other on the other side. "And in order to have better communication they made a hole in the wall to join the 2 apts... When I went that's what they told me, that's why we don't want PRs to come here because they're destroying the apartments."

154: "When many PRs came here to the United States-- you know that they like roast pig. Many times the only way of being able to make a pig were in those metal bathtubs, they can put the coal in there and they can make the pig that way. That worked well as long as the bathtubs were metal. A number of the fires that took place in Hfd were because the PRs were roasting the pigs in the bathtub, and they were plastic, so they burned all the way down when they put in the coal... But even so... that didn't dampen our enthusiasm. We continued with the parties, the parranda, and the aguinaldo. So that the pig ended up getting roasted even if it was in the oven but it tasted good... What happens is that there are also so many rules that apply that go against our culture... They have changed a little through ordinances. But at that time you couldn't light a fire outside and roast a whole pig if you didn't have some special permissions. So you had to apply to the city for special permission. If they came and found you roasting a pig in the yard, the firemen and everyone came to intervene... They roasted them in the basement but that also created the problem of gases... But even so they looked for a way to roast our pig especially during Christmas."

179: After he moved, he thinks he lost some photos. He's going to look for a box of photos. [He recommends Gerry {Geraldo} Zayas, one of the agricultural workers, 665-2761] Gerry was the host of one of the first television pgms oriented to the community, 'Adelante.' He doesn't remember the year. Jesus Miranda, who worked with CRT [Community Renewal Team] he doesn't know where he is now. Esther Jimenez is in FL. There are not many of the old guard left. Those who worked in tobacco lived in E Granby and they lost contact, Petra Amaro. One of the faithful close to Maria Sanchez. Olga Mele. Gladys Hernandez. JC's wife worked in La Escuelita [the first bilingual school in Htfd] and afterwards when the program went to Barnard Brown, where it still is. Juan Fuentes "has photographs from when I was 6 feet tall, but it was with the afro and those platform shoes... about '76, '77."

270: In the Wadsworth Athenaeum there was a bathtub in the Egyptian exhibit. He got inside the tub. There's an old clipping that he found with a photo of him inside the tub.

277: His son is 17, is looking for a university to study software design.