

Interview with: Joaquina Rodríguez

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### Side A

001: She came here in 1950. "I went to work in 'la chicken.' I began in 1950...it was on Donald [?] St. From Donald they moved to Bethany, I worked there for 15 and a half years. And from there I spent 2 years at home without working because they moved to Willimantic [in '65]...I didn't want to go because I had my 3 children...in school. And I...didn't want anything to happen to them and...to be so far away.

016: In '67 the same company opened another factory in S Windsor. "So they came looking for me and I went to work there. I worked for 6 years. After 6 years I began to work at...335 Main, where they opened an office for Puerto Ricans. That's where I began to work. From there until today...I went in '75 to...CRT...Community Renewal Team...They have Head Start, they have Food Share, they have a food bank, many things...I was there for 21 years and I retired from there."

029: "I brought my mother to live here also. She lived some years here, afterwards she went to PR, she died in '87. And here I have my children...my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren." They live in different places. Her first daughter is named Elsa Milagros, her husband works for the city, now for the merchants, Elsa is at St. Francis Hospital, and Sonia works in [ ], which belongs to them [the hospital]. Her son Luis works for the state.

052: Her original name was Vargas Toruellas. Vargas through her mother, although Toruellas was her father's last name. She was born in Ponce in 1920, she is 79, in August she will be 80. "And I feel very strong, I work here in the house...I still do work for people, helping the people here like now, with the census and all that...I am a justice of the peace and so I help people a lot, filling out papers for them, stamping [notarizing?] things, marrying them. There's always something to do."

067: "My mother was a seamstress. And at that time women almost didn't work outside the home, they worked inside the house. My mother was...a good seamstress. And...my father worked in agriculture...in the [sugar] cane...[as a] laborer...He was what they call here the boss...he was a foreman...[My mother worked] for a store. It was called Bardecia...she sewed pants and all that...in Ponce, on Antorcha St in Ponce. We lived in [the barrio of] Belgica...I was raised in 4 Calles, Belgica, and San Anton...in those 3 barrios."

086: [her father was a musician] "You know the bomba? My father played bomba. And I had cousins that played plena, but the way they dance the bomba and the plena now, that's neither

plena nor bomba. Because...it was a unique style. The woman used wide skirts, like you see now, and my mother sewed the petticoats that they wore, she put on a lot of ribbons and all that." She has books about the plena. [her father played] "the barrels. They used barrels..."

100: She graduated from 8<sup>th</sup> grade, going into 9<sup>th</sup>, and then 9<sup>th</sup> to senior year of high school. She came here with her diploma from PR. "I was very mischievous. Because...the men back then...liked to have more than one woman. So my father had his wife who was my mother. But he also had a black woman who is very black, her name was Paula. And that woman worked with some lawyers...They had 2 young children...She became very fond of me, my stepmother...and she went to the house and my mother treated her as if nothing [was out of the ordinary]. So she loved me, she loved me so much that she spoke with them. Since she didn't have children any more, so that I would go live with her. And she took me with her. I spent 5 years living with her. She died and I love her as if she were alive and as if she had been my own mother...I did a lot of bad things...and she would go and defend me...I beat up the boys because some of them played pelegrina [?] and that jump rope, la cuica as they call it in PR... We lived at that time with her in 4 Calles. And we would start to play...any boy that would jump in, well, I gave it to him...but...I never failed in my school...I respected my parents...And they're dead and I adore them...I went to where my father was and I said to him father, I love my father more than my mother. My mother was a really good person, a domestic woman...But my father I loved so much...He was my adoration...A black man, my mother was light-skinned."

145: They were 12 brothers and sisters through her mother. From her father's side one sister and 3 brothers. One was a baseball player. There are many ball players in the family. "I love baseball...I learned to play in school, I learned to sew, I learned embroidery and pulled-thread work...When I had my first child, I made the diaper bag, I embroidered it and I put 'baby' on it. I married in PR, I had my 3 children and then he died... We separated and I came here, then he died there. I got married again to Enrique Rodriguez who was a merchant here...First he had a furniture store, he sold it and he bought a jewelry store."

170: [she came to Htd] "looking for a better way of life. I came alone. I worked at the base... [ ]. Before I got married, at a base, in 1940... '41, '42 around there, during the Second [World] War... Many of us girls who worked there got to know each other and all that, and they wanted to come too, to look for a better way of life. So I had a lot of family in NY, but I didn't go to live in NY... I knew about Htfd through a man who worked here, and I knew him there in PR, and so he told us about Htfd... He lived in... Guilford... [he told them re Htfd] that here... one could work, that migrants and all those people came, and many Jamaicans came, the girls that were in school when they finished their classes also came to work at different places here... When I came, a lot of us came... crying because we had left our children there. [her mother and her sister took care of her kids]... But then I went and I brought them, I brought my children, I brought my mother, and my sister. So my sister took care of my children and I worked. But later when I also got her a job, a woman named Ruth took care of them for me."

207: "And then I began to bring the family... almost all my family is here... [I lived] on Main, in a hotel that was here... Across from the fire station... I lived there for a month, and I worked in la chicken, which was on the next little street, on Donald... and from there I moved to Barber, 50 Barber, I lived there until I moved to Bellevue... St."

220: [her impression of Htfd] "Good because I arrived, it seems to me on a Saturday and on Monday I began to work... The same man got me a job in la chicken. Then I got to know a Jamaican who helped me a lot..." Others "showed me how I had to dress. It came... like from heaven because right away I got good friendships... Black women, but since I had brought my little bit of English from PR, well, I could communicate with them. And they told me how I had to dress in the summer, in the winter... I began to learn, I learned right away. And at night I went to school, over there at Barnard Brown. But since I already knew a lot, because I had graduated [from HS] in PR, they changed me over to Htfd High. It was on Broad St. and then I graduated... In '67 I went to the state [?]. Never... thank God did I have... to live off the state for my children... I was earning 75 cents an hour in la chicken. That was peeling the hens... But in that I worked until 3:30 in the afternoon. Afterwards I began at 4 until 12 at night, which was the shift they gave to the girls who were in school... I earned 42 dollars, and from that I sent 15 to my mother every week. With 15 dollars you could do a lot because that was in 1950 when things were very cheap... The rent that one paid at least 26 dollars... everything included... The little apt was furnished... and they gave you sheets, they came and changed the sheets and all that. That's how Hfd was."

265: There were good conditions at la chicken. "I didn't know how to do the work but a black woman, her name was Viola, she showed me. And since I was the only Hispanic, and very young, well, I began to work with a lot of energy, here and there, and then I began to bring people from PR. Who all came to work in la chicken. Then I was the one who took care of them." They didn't have to work that fast but they had to wear boots. "From there I went to South Windsor, there it was cutting up the chickens... for Kentucky Fried Chicken, for the Chicken Coop, for all those restaurants... we cut up the meat... [the company was called] Connecticut Poultry... I worked there until 3:30, and then at 4 the schoolgirls came in... So I stayed there working until 12 at night. When you're young you have a lot of energy... I wanted to bring my family, and let me tell you that my brother's wife died, she left 2 children, my mother took them. I had three of my own and with those 2, 5. Two from a sister of mine that had died, there were 7, and 1, my brother's daughter, that they took... at 4 and 1/2 months. There were 8 and my brother's daughter the littlest one who was born later, there were 9... I brought my mother here with 9 children."

305: She lived on Bellevue, they gave her a big apt. "My sister and I worked, my mother took care of the children. Sealtest brought me the milk... they put the milk in the door, and they put 3 big bags of clothing... Something I didn't need. My mother sent them to PR, to the rest of the family... because yes it was that clothing here was very cheap... I could even buy shoes for a quarter..." Her mother was with her a long time, then she went to her house in PR, then she came back, and she left in '68.

328: My brother Julian came in '53, and he went to work at la chicken also. My brother Miguel still lives here. All of my brothers who came worked in la chicken. But afterwards my brother... he liked carpentry... and in PR well he worked as a carpenter, and he left la chicken and began to work in carpentry and all that, and he's still here [Miguel]... Julian opened a restaurant. Pello who is here too, and he later went to work in a nursery. And the youngest, well, he went to the army, and from the army he went to PR." One brother in the army for 27 years, married a German, they live in Virginia. He was a sergeant.

359: [in la chicken] "We worked upstairs. I reviewed the work...to make sure that the chicken was very clean...so I had a friend, her name was Elba...Reyes. And we were...very [close]... They called her 'Blondie.' And the boss, since we were always together, Jimmy the boss brought a rope, he tied her and he tied me here at the waist, when I walked I dragged her all over the place. Because we were...real good friends... And we sang, we had fun working and singing and enjoying ourselves a lot inside and everything because the bosses were really good people... I wish that time would come back."

379: Then she worked in the office on Main St [name?]. Raul Anduaga, a Peruvian, Teresa Cusano, a Uruguayan, Ramon Martinez, PR, Cristina Corso, Argentine. An office on Main. Cristina was Ramon's secretary, Teresa was JR's secretary. "I was the only black woman there. But we would go out for lunch and I was their mother... They went to my house and they were great." Teresa's husband was killed, an Italian, a Puerto Rican, shot. "I was the director. It was helping the community... Whatever was needed... we had to go to meetings and Mrs. Natividad Passmore was there." Married to an American, Ramon Martinez the boss, Ernesto Gonzalez. There were some blacks also, Gloria Schaefer. They worked in another office and JR and others in the Main St. office. "If a person who came to the office... we had the fieldworkers, Raul was a fieldworker. They went to visit the houses and all that [of the Hispanics]... But if someone... went who needed someone, or that someone would bring him to some place, like taking them to the jail to see someone or something, well, Raul went, and sometimes I went with him. If there were some prisoners there who needed anything, well, the family came to us and we went there to see them and to speak to him, to give counseling and all that." A boy [named] Roberto who went to see [?] every time, Roberto Figueroa. "And younger children... who had problems because Raul is very intelligent... we went to see them and speak [to them]... and many people here went... I didn't because I was always in the office."

470: She also has a picture that came out in the newspaper. She has many photos to review, she has ones from now and before. She will look for them.

485: [when she came to Htfd] "Estelle Cortes was there [and someone else whose last name she can't remember]. There weren't many families, 2 or 3 families, no more. There wasn't anything Hispanic, nothing, nothing, nothing... Well, when my brother came, the Hispanic bodega was my brother's... It was called La Popular... [before, he went around in a car] "selling vegetables and avocados... they went to buy them in NY and then he and his compadre Nandin... Fernando Gonzalez... They sold house to house... until afterwards they opened the store. After the store they opened a restaurant, which belonged to the 2 of us [Julian and JR] because I had some money in the bank and you had to give them 1000 dollars, and I went, I gave him 500... The bodega was at 1580 Main... the restaurant 1305, Albany Ave... Sometimes on Saturdays [she worked in the restaurant] because her uncle's wife, who was here also, was the one who cooked. [the had] rice, beans, steak, pork chops, PR food, stuffed potato pastries [*rellenos de papa*] ...meatloaf that he made himself... All the tobacco workers... ate there in my brother's restaurant."

541: "When the people came from PR they went looking for state aid, by then they knew [about it]. They had everything ready. That's what ruined the Hispanics---they gave tremendous help to the people, to buy furniture, clothing, and they continued abusing it and look at how it is now."

560: [Julian's involvement with politics] "He helped a lot in politics, the same as me. I still work in all the elections. I work from 5 in the morning till 8:30 at night....At that time we would get into a bus, and we would go as far as the camps to register people so that they would come and vote." Miller, the treasurer, a good man, Peter Bloom, a lawyer, many who are now dead. "He was a Democrat [Julian] and I was Republican... Because when I came here the Republicans helped me a lot... They gave me support... I said with something, well, with something I have to pay them back... because when I came here doña Esther Jimenez...registered me as a Democrat. The first vote I gave I gave to the Democrats."

600: [the Republicans] "They came to my house. They asked me if I wanted to work with them. Well, I [said] of course... So after I left work I went to a mobile unit, one of those buses that they had, to show the people how to vote. And to register people. Because in Puerto Rico, my father was... a poll watcher [*juez de mesa*]. And me, well, everything that he did I was right there." A *juez de mesa* is the one who watches the polls during the elections..."So, well, I went to help and all that, they give me 50 cents... From there I came with my ideal to do something in politics. So, well, they came to my house, and they called me, they spoke with me... I registered... a lot of people and I worked on Saturdays, I set up a table out on the streets and there I worked registering people [outside of the restaurant or wherever]." She went on registering, it wasn't important which party [people would vote for]."

645: She and her brother got along well in spite of their political differences. Like she's a big fan of Boston and her son, her two daughters are big fans of the Yankees. Her husband was a big fan in PR of Mayaguez and she of Ponce.

667: She has always gone to Sacred Heart. "I got married there and my daughters married there. Father Cooney married me."

713: She got to know her second husband here, working in la chicken. Enrique Rodriguez Cruz, from Juana Diaz. They got married in '57.

## Side B

006: They lived on Edward St. He went to work in windows on Silas Deane, a windows factory, from there he opened the furniture store. First at 1608 Main, then at 1325 Main. He opened the store around the beginning of the '70s.

023: After Julian Vargas's businesses, Mariano Cortez's stores. Rodrigo Garcia who still has a jewelry store, Pedro Nuñez had a restaurant on Albany, William Mercado's *Aqui Me Quedo*. Many PR businesses, mostly in the North End. In the '50s very few, aside from her brother's businesses.

042: She didn't experience discrimination. "But yes I can say that on High St the ones who lived there were Italians and Jews. And they didn't rent to any PRs, no Hispanic. On Main St also... they didn't want Hispanics. And they started to flee, because afterwards the Hispanics began to get in [to the neighborhood] and they left."

050: "I brought my good education from PR because I grew up among those lawyers... I slept there, they bought me clothing, toys, and I didn't even know ... what Santa Claus was, because yes there were the Kings, but not Santa Claus... My stepmother went to the house, and I stayed over there. And I got educated thanks to my stepmother and thanks to my mother and father."

062: At Barnard Brown she studied the same thing as in PR, more English. When she worked at CRT, she had already graduated from Htfd High. At CRT they gave her the opportunity to take a college exam, she took the exam with a lot of people. She passed it. "I said, caramba, after so many years after graduating in PR, and how I came, I graduated here and I passed the exam." But she could only go for 2 months because of the job. They told her that she had to change [her schedule] to nighttime, she said she couldn't because she was afraid of walking, she had to take 2 buses. But they gave her that opportunity to go to Greater Htd College.

080: She brought her children in '53, her youngest was 3. It was great to raise them here. "Besides that I raised my children to achieve... They went to school, from school they went up... so there was a street here that was Belden... here... a store. And my son went there to be the man's helper. But I wouldn't let the girls, I wouldn't let the girls go down [into the st]. Because I was afraid, you were living in a strange place... I baptized them here, because they went to St. Michael's Church... A black woman baptized them there. The black woman lived next to [the church?]. And he went there and he went up at 10 at night, and I punished him for that... and I never had to say anything to him. He fell in love when it was time for him to fall in love, and he went to stay for a little while, to call me... I'm a little late because I'm with Cuca. Cuca was his girlfriend... But I couldn't sleep until he came home. And my son still showed me respect. He's a musician also... a band that's called La Nueva Consistencia... bolero music, merengue, musica criolla, salsa." He plays the bass, which she gave to him about 35 years ago. They robbed the bus with all the instruments, a friend of JR's told her that she had seen it somewhere, they got it back. She has a picture of him [her son] with the bass.

131: She always had enough money to raise her children. Her son's girlfriend lived in NY. After school he worked in a store on Main St. He left and he didn't come back the next morning. She called her brother who was a nephew [?]. He had gotten married in NY, a cousin of JR's signed as his father. After that she helped him out. "Because I adore my children, I didn't bring them here to suffer. So I began to help him... I lived on Belden, they lived on William St, near here." A friend of JR's told her that they had gotten married, she didn't know for 2 weeks. They got married because the woman was 4 months pregnant. Her son doesn't drink or smoke, his vice is music and work. He now lives in New Britain, he has a house, Elsa lives in Wethersfield, Sonia in Bloomfield.

172: Her son went from house to house with a file, collecting for the store, the people had credit and he went to get the money. Her son worked at an after school [pgm] in the San Juan Center, he went to clean in the afternoons. When he got married JR covered all the expenses, but when Sonia got married, she had her own money. When she was in school, she worked at Aetna. "Here I even sold beer in the house... I had 15 men eating in my house, 15 single men... I lived in the house in front, and in the house in back, that was for single men... And I worked, I had a list, Monday, Tuesday, through Sunday, and the names of the 15, to write down according to the meals they came for. I came [from the chicken] to cook, and I served meals to all those men. Most of them were relatives... I would get up very early in the morning. I made them breakfast, and afterwards I went to work... With that I was able to help my children who are there [?], and

many people... Here the person who knows me knows about it... The 3 of them graduated." Luis became a social worker, her daughters have good jobs, and JR never had to go to the state [welfare]. From '60 until '74 she lived at 43 Belden, the period when she cooked. They built a new house there, she lived there. She moved to her current house because the rent [there] was \$635, and the bills on top of that.

222: In the beginning the PRs got together on different occasions. "And baseball games in the summer... My brother had a team [sponsored by the restaurant]... And my husband played, and my cousins and nephews played, and many friends... Eugenio Caro... My compay Johnny Castillo... his nephews and his brothers... It was like a single family. Maria Sanchez. This was a family... where we all got along. And that's where people began to get together, I made frituras when my mother was here, we made pasteles... We made empanadillas... to sell in the park... [during] a baseball game..." Her daughter was the Queen of Congeniality [*Reina de Simpatia*][in the PR parade], queen of the people in love, she has a picture, selling in the park. Maria helped her a lot. Taking her daughter places.

248: Afterwards JR? took her [?] to NY to buy clothing. "And afterwards I sold clothing too [from the house]... I went to NY every 2 weeks, I bought clothes, records, medicine, well, I did everything, and brought my daughter up well thank God. [she shows me a picture of her son in law, who worked in la chicken, he came from NY]. When her daughters got married their boyfriends had to ask JR for their hands. [She shows me pictures of the girls, wedding pictures, one in '65 where she got married at Sacred Heart, Sonia as the Queen of Congeniality, JR in '57, a picture of her son. She doesn't have photos of the store or the restaurant, she has family photos, of her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nephews, from the '50s and '60s until now. She shows me a poem her brother [Miguel] wrote.]

317: "I had a lot of friends and I adore my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren, and anyway I like it here. I go to PR every year... to see my island and to spend time there with my 2 sisters, and I brother I have and nephews and all that. But I stay more at my sister's house, the one who helped me raise my children... I have my children here, and they have already been raised and they have their families, and they have their jobs, and wherever my children are that's where I want to be."

348: She shows me the book about bomba and plena. She knew Ruth Fernandez, they lived in the same barrio, she married the brother in law of one of JR's brothers who was a baseball player.

365: "I like Htfd because when I came to live in Htfd... You could put a sheet on the grass and lie down and sleep there. You could have your doors open... Well, I like it because here's where I came into my own. I came into my own here, my children came into their own here and everything and that's why I like Htfd. It's true that now there is-- but where isn't there crime? But I always remember the old days. That Htfd welcomed me with open arms. And it gave me a lot of opportunities. Because through the Party as well, that made me... Justice of the Peace, that has helped me because I earn my little bit of money as well." She still belongs to the Republican Party.

387: Here people have come to live off the state, not to work nor to go to school. But she came, she studied, she worked. "I worked during the day and I went to school at night. Because I

wanted my children to have some of what I didn't have. And thanks to God and the Virgin, I did it." And here her children have their occupations, etc.

411: She loves dancing. "I'm not dancing now like I used to, you went, musicians came from NY... When they came... they did a show, they came to eat at my house. I cooked for them. When Sophie Hernandez came, Pellin Rodriguez came, all those musicians from PR... [they had their show] in the theater... the Lyric on Park St which doesn't exist any more, and at the Lenox, which doesn't exist either... on Albany. [movie theaters that also had shows and dances]... The 3 Patines came... and when they had dances as far as away as Bristol and all that, a bunch of us went to dance. We went to the baseball games, holidays like Memorial Day... we went to the parks to cook over a fire in the mountains and all that. It was a very, very good life, the whole family was united, very united."

440: They helped each other in a crisis. "What I can say is that everyone in my family that came from PR, where they came to live was at my house. They had meals, their clothes washed and ironed... and a place to stay until they... When I go to PR they say, this was our mother, there in Htfd. And that makes me... proud, I feel very happy when they say that. I helped them a lot. And working at CRT, the blacks, they call me Grandma... Because if someone came angry or something like that... I... sit down, tell me what's the matter, do you want a cup of coffee?... Then they calmed down, because I took counseling too. I got a lot out of CRT. They sent us to take counseling... and consumer ed [?]. in order... to be able to help people... I have a lot of diplomas that CRT gave me, and that helped me a lot because I still go on... if they call me, look at this, I need an apt... I speak to my son, I speak to my son in law, and they help me... My son came, he took a box of children's clothing and a bag of shoes... and another bag of clothes... If they give it to me, I say yes, I'll take it, because I have people to give it to. A bed, a mattress, anything, here I am. And my son too, since he works with the homeless... He works in a state office that's on Vine... and he helps out a lot. They give me purchases which they send something like this [?]. So they built a building on the corner of [Cape?] and Main, they gave 15 apts to him, he's filled them with those people, according to how you behave, and thank God I have an angel, because those black men and black women and the PR people, whites and everybody... when we're working on the utilities [*energia*], filling out utilities papers, and I helped them a lot. And when we created the Food Share also... they gave out cheese, rice, flour, cornmeal, butter, all that once a month. And so they still have the Food Share at CRT where if the people don't have food, they come, and they fill out an application, they call [are called?] and then... they bring them the purchases... We give out Thanksgiving turkeys... a full basket... There were times that I had to go up as far as the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor to bring it [the food]."

522: She worked for 11 years at Stowe Village, she has pictures of all those black children when they graduated, they gave lunch to the children every day during the summer, through CRT. The leftover food they gave to the people. They gave her a lot of pictures and a lot of gifts. A black woman, Christine Moody, calls her Mommy. She brings gifts from PR to everyone at a senior center. Mr. James Harris helped a lot to get HR into CRT, he was the director. He was going out with a PR who helped out too.

577: "If I die they have to bury me here, they won't take me to PR, because my children are here."