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Oral history interview with Angel Gabriel Rivera García, November 2022

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ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Angel G. Rivera García

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Angel G. Rivera García conducted by Andrea S. Torres Vega on November 2022. This interview is part of course work done by students at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcript Interview

Interviewer: Andrea S. Torres Vega

Interviewee: Angel G. Rivera García

Date: November 2022

Location: Terrace, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico

Andrea: [00:00:00]

Hello, my name is Andrea Torres and I am here with Angel Rivera in Mayaguez Terrace on November third. I'm going to be interviewing him. Angel, are you okay with me recording this interview?

Angel [00:21:20]

Yes, I consent to this recording.

Andrea [00:25:20]

Just for the people to know, I'm going to be interviewing Angel for my English class on social justice issues, for which we chose hurricane, Maria.

Ok, to start off, Angel, where were you born?

00:44:02

Well I was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico in San Lucas hospital on the 20th of October. I have 20 years.

00:55:03

Where are your parents from? Describe them.

00:58:78

My parents are from Ponce as well. My parents are very comprehensive, very passive. They encourage me in all the things in my life. Overall they are very good parents.

01:31:40

How would you describe yourself?

1:35:24

That's a tough question...

1:37:85

Your personality, your physical traits...

01:42:60

Well, in the personality aspect I think, and the people that I know, think that I'm a funny guy. The clown. I tend to use sense of humor to get out of awkward situations or sad situations and all that. That's like my shield. I am very friendly with others, I like being friendly. I'm a little timid. I don't know if that's the word, but I'm a little timid.

2:38:90

Yeah, shy.

2:39:57

Shy, yeah, shy. That's my personality. The physical part; I don't know, I'm a skinny guy, 5'11"- I mean I think I'm 5'9", but I say 5'11". [Looks out the window] And it's raining. Yeah, I'm a pretty normal guy, I have dark hair. I'm white, kinda white. And yeah, that's me.

3:14:99

In the personality sense, do you think something specific made you that way? Maybe the way a parent or sibling was or is.

3:27:04

Can you say that again?

3:28:28

Do you think something specific made you that way?

3:32:98

Made me that way how?

3:35:20

Your personality.

3:26:81

I don't understand, pause it.

[Stopped recording as requested to explain question]

3:39:89

Do you think something specific made you that way?

3:34:90

Something specific... I think that's like- I'm gonna say hereditary, 'cause my grandpa (the dad of my mom), and my dad- and the dad of my dad, we are- not funny guys, but we are always laughing and making jokes about everything in a respectful way. It all comes from my father I think.

4:27:76

And what was your childhood like?

4:26:28

My childhood was pretty normal. I was a single child for the first four or three years of my life. Then my mom had my sister and then when I was twelve- I think, let me do the count. [pauses] No, I was ten. When I was ten my little brother was born, and I think I had a normal, pretty good childhood. I was very "consented", is that the word? [He meant to say spoiled]

5:17:78

Ah, spoiled. [In spanish]

5:21:93

Yeah, spoiled. Ah, the part that I liked most about my childhood was that we all, at the birthdays and family parties, we were a pretty united family. All my family always went to parties and all that.

5:58:65

Are you guys still that united?

00:06:02

Mmm... I'd like to say yes, but that's a no 'cause, you know, people grow up. We were that united because my cousins- we were like six and of nearly the same age. We were like one or two years from each other. I think that's why we were all so united because the parents wanted their kids to hang out more with the other kids of the same age.

00:06:57

What is one memory from your childhood that you never forget?

00:07:04

One memory from my childhood that I never forget... [Clicks tongue] I don't know. One memory, this one is not sad, but it's normal sad. It's emotional for a child of course. The Nintendo DS came out and I got one for Christmas, I remember it was a blue one. Three or four months later I had a baseball game and I was gonna go play so I handed it [the Nintendo DS] to my sister. She was playing with it and when the game ended we left in the car. When we were at the house, I was like "Um, where is my DS?". My parents literally didn't know and my sister said that she gave it to my mother. It results that the DS stayed at the park. So, I lost my DS four months after it was gifted to me. That was sad.

00:8:49

What is your relationship with your siblings like?

00:8:52

My relationship with my siblings is, I think, normal. We are not the type of siblings that are always very united or very lovely to each other. I mean, we are, but it's not too much in comparison to other siblings. 'Cause, there are siblings that literally love each other. I mean, I love them, but yeah it's more like a friendship, I guess. I don't know.

00:09:47

And how was your house like? [Childhood house]

00:09:51

My house physically, or-? Structurally? It is still my house.

00:10:06

Has it always been the same house?

00:10:11

That was where I was going, I lived there for like two years- I mean, I literally don't remember because I was like two years old. My grandpa gave it to my- It wasn't given but it

was a temporary place for my dad and my mom to stay. It was a house that my grandpa built. We were there for like two years and then we moved to the house that we are now. The house we lived in before- it was a two-story house, but we only used the first floor because the second floor was for my aunt. It was a pretty simple house, it had wood, but also cement. I don't know how to describe it, I think it was small. The house that we are in now is a pretty good house, it's not that small. It's medium size, I think. It's medium size because my dad made some amendments to the house, in the garage he built a family room, and he made a bigger backyard because he put cement on the floor and all that. It's a pretty great house.

11:55:20

How was high school for you?

11:56:67

Well, high school, in the aspect of friendship and, apart from the curricular stuff- I mean the curricular stuff was good as well, I'm not saying it was bad. But apart from the curricular stuff, I had 3 friends, 3 true friends that are still my true friends. We were pretty united and, you know, it was pretty good. I don't know what to say, it was the best years of my life, I think.

00:13:12

And how was your transition from high school to college?

00:13:14

The transition from high school to college was pretty bad, cause of COVID and all of that. I entered college in 2020. So the transition to online classes- overall I took all of a semester of online classes in my high school in 12th grade. It was good, I have to say that it was good cause we were in twelfth grade and the teachers just let us do what we wanted. But it was bad at the same time because the thing about school is to see your friends every day, talk with them and all that. In COVID we didn't have that, so in the university, it was a lot worse because I didn't know anyone. Well, I knew one guy, he was one of my friends. But I wanted to meet new people and I was nearly one year and a half in online classes, so it was pretty bad. Now that I'm in my third year I think it's going well. I have to say it's good now.

00:15:07

Did starting college with online classes affect your learning experience?

00:15:12

My what?

00:13:40

Your learning experience.

00:15:16

Yes, it affected it and I think that is common knowledge now. Not common knowledge but all the professors can see now that it was like that because in online classes you could- I don't know- do the test with your friend or something or look on the internet. [Laughs] But we were taking college in easy mode, that's how I can describe it, and I didn't, as I said, have- I literally just had like two friends in that year that I had online classes. So it was a pretty bad learning experience. The other professors from Calculus 1 or Calculus 2 can see it now. The people that took Precalculus 1 and Precalculus 2 online like me, we didn't learn shit.

00:16:44

Has there been a time when you think about changing your major?

00:16:52

I think that yes. The first years. Like the first year and a half I think I had that thought one or two times because, going back to the response that I told you before, it was pretty awful taking those math classes and chemical classes online. So I thought "I don't want this, it's too difficult." It was boring as hell, but I thought "Well, this is my first year. In the first two years I'm taking classes that I'm taking in any major. I mean, not in any, but in most majors." I knew that I wanted to go for stem classes and stem majors, so I knew that I was going to be taking those classes anyway. I told myself I was going to do the first two years and when I took classes like the ones I'm taking now of Electrical Engineering (because I'm studying Electrical Engineering, I don't know if I told you that), if I didn't like them then I was going to change majors. But I liked them so I'm not going to change.

00:18:36

Why did you choose electrical engineering?

00:18:42

Because I didn't have anything else. I was thinking first about architecture, because I like designing things. I like the concept of designing things, drawing structures, and everything. Then I instructed myself a little more and decided to go to Mechanical Engineering but my GPA didn't let me get into mechanical engineering. So I went with electrical, I entered with electrical. I talked with some people and they told me that I could enter with electrical and in two years I could change because they are the same classes, as I told you before. But it resulted that I didn't want to change, I liked electrical things.

00:19:47

That's what I was gonna ask you if you would have preferred going into mechanical engineering.

Going back to high school and talking about hurricane Maria, where did you spend the time during the hurricane? Describe that day.

00:20:11

Man, that was a kind of traumatic thing. Where did I- where did I what?

00:20:18

Where did you spend the day of the hurricane?

00:20:26

I spent it at my house, I mean- not in my house- it WAS my house but in a bedroom of my house. It was in the bathroom, not during all of the hurricane, but all the first three or two hours of the hurricane. We were in the bathroom and stayed near it because my dad, being the all-knowing guy he is- he knows everything, the mansplainer, know-it-all. He said that the bathroom was the safest place in the house. We were in the bathroom with the door open or at least near it. After three hours we just said, "Nothing's gonna happen, this house is going to hold". So we were all over the house. I mostly spent it sleeping, because it was very cold. It was raining three times the rain that is falling now. I don't know if it is going to be heard, but it's raining as hell. So yeah, I spent it at my house. We got out in the middle of the eye- when the eye was passing, my dad said "Okay, let's go out. Let's see how it is," We went out to the front of the house and it was all very calm, you couldn't hear anything. The sky was a little dark. It was like 1 pm, I think. It was dark, not like the night- but yeah. All of a sudden we heard the winds again. We were outside so we were like "Okay we have to run inside 'cause this is gonna begin again." We got inside and waited for it to pass. We were pretty safe at my house, the windows of my room were old so, every time that the wind struck you could hear them open and close.

00:23:30

What did you guys do outside while it was calm?

00:23:33

We talked to the neighbors. I mean, not me, my dad. It was raining a little, so we walked to the other side of the street because there we have a "channel" of water, "un canal de agua". We have them in front of my street and we wanted to see how much water was passing through and it was nearly full. The river was nearly full. We went to the backyard to check on a tree that was there and it had fallen fully. And yeah we saw the destruction of trees and everything that was on the floor.

00:24:42

The river never overflowed?

00:24:44

No, the river never overflowed. I mean it was not a river, that's why it never overflowed. It's made for it to not overflow, unless it rains for like, I don't know, a year.

00:25:05

How did you feel during the hurricane?

00:25:09

Emotionally?

00:25:12

Yes.

00:25:12

I think I felt normal, I was sleeping so I didn't feel anything during most of the hurricane. I felt preoccupied and concerned for my friends, my family and all that. We couldn't talk to them. I remember that I was talking to a friend and the hurricane began and all the connection went to hell. We didn't contact each other for like a week. In that aspect, it was pretty scary. But I felt secure in the house and all that.

00:26:15

Did you guys have to help anyone around the neighborhood?

00:26:21

Well, I don't think so, 'cause not much happened in the neighborhood. My dad and I went to the front of the street where there were a lot of trees and we cut all those trees that had fallen down and threw them into the river or channel to clean the place. I think we cleaned the part of our next-door neighbors. That took nearly a year to clean- to clean it fully. There was a tree that we surrendered.

00:27:30

Surrendered? Like you gave up?

00:27:31

We surrendered. We gave up because it was too thick and we just had machetes, we didn't have any chainsaws or anything. We were purely hitting it, hitting it, and hitting it. It didn't give up, so WE gave up. A couple of months later, my dad got a chainsaw, he borrowed a chainsaw, and, little by little, took those things out. My dad was the one who helped a lot. Not just the neighborhood, but the community. Because he works at Claro. If you're from Puerto Rico you know that Claro was the first telecommunication company that had service. The only one that had service and provided service for a couple of months, I would say 7 or 6 months after the hurricane. All the other companies supplied from Claro. My dad was one of the workers that helped with that. They got all the infrastructure up. I don't know how to explain it to you, he could do it better. Three days after the hurricane, he told us that he had finished working. I mean, he didn't finish working because they literally work all day. They were 24/7 on call. He got out of work. He was going to my house and they managed to turn on an antenna, I think, I don't know how to say it. I don't know the correct term, but they turned something on that gave signal [phone service] on the highway.

00:30:23

Where? In Ponce?

00:30:24

In Ponce. On the highway in Ponce, I don't know where it was. He was passing through there with the Claro company car and he saw a lot of people, I could say hundreds of cars, on the side of the road calling their families. When he passed with the company car they were all applauding him and his coworker that was behind him. So, that was an emotional moment for him.

00:31:10

Because he was going in the Claro car?

00:31:13

He was going in the company car.

00:31:19

And you said it was emotional for him...

00:31:15

It was emotional for him because he saw all the people happy and crying for something that he helped with. It was pretty emotional. If you meet him it will pass like an hour and in that hour he will tell you that story.

00:31:44

So it's something he always remembers.

00:31:46

Yeah, it's something like if you talk about hurricane Maria he will say "Oh you know, I helped turn on an antenna that provided service for a lot of people!"

00:32:02

One of the first antennas?

00:32:02

The first. It was the first.

00:32:12

What difficulties did you and your family go through after the hurricane?

00:32:25

Difficulties in- I think every family in Puerto Rico went through the difficulty of light, of power, of not having a way to cook. We luckily had a gas stove- No, no, that's not true. We didn't have a gas stove, we had the barbecue, and we were cooking on the barbecue- yeah, with gas. But in like a week, my grandmother had a gas stove and she brought it with her to my house. She stayed there for a long time, so we used that stove. I think the necessity that we passed was like for all the families in Puerto Rico. Not like all, but most, because there are people who went through very difficult things. Thanks to God we had our house and all that, we just didn't have power like all the families. I didn't have cold water or a freezer to freeze the meat and all that. So I had to make a lot of lines for gas and for ice, and I think I made a line too in a McDonald's for food.

00:34:18

For what?

00:34:20

For food, in McDonald's. So, it was pretty rough.

00:34:28

And what things did you and your siblings do to maintain entertained during the time with no power or internet?

00:34:39

We played cards. I remember we had a lot of beef those days because we played Monopoly.

00:34:52

Beef? Like you were mad at each other?

00:34:54

Like we were fighting- because we were playing Monopoly and Monopoly is well-known for destroying families [Laughs]. But yeah, board games, card games. We sometimes charged our phones in the car or something and we downloaded some movies to watch them. Our dad sometimes

00:35:19

Once you had service?

00:35:22

Yeah, once we had service of course. But my dad, in like a week, managed to- you know that he is a worker and knows about the stuff about telecommunications, he worked out to get us- we got house internet. We got wifi in a week, so we just needed power and he powered the internet with an inverter, he connected it to the car, turned it on, and we got a little power to the cellphones and all that. We did that, and I think that was all. We played a lot of card and board games. I think we went outside to play basketball.

00:36:28

Where did you spend most of the time?

00:36:30

Where did I spend most of the time... At my house.

00:36:33

Outside?

00:36:33

Yeah. But most of the time I spent it sleeping, because I didn't have anything to do. Or in my house playing, playing with my siblings. Another game that we played that was "beefy", that we had a lot of fights for; I don't know what to call it- "Stop", the game we were playing was Stop. Someone says a letter. You have to put [write] a country, a name, the last name, a lot of things with that letter. That one that did it first had to say "Stop", and you won. We had a lot of fights because everyone invented words.

00:37:54

Fake words?

00:37:54

They cheated a lot, including me.

00:38:05

And what are your thoughts on how the Autoridad de Energia Electrica responded to the power outages?

00:38:14

Hmm, I don't know. My opinion in that is that the way that they responded was normal, but the way that they prepared beforehand was the one that was pretty bad. We had a pretty bad system and the authorities didn't prepare for that. They knew that the hurricane was

gonna happen, but they just overestimated it. So, it all went to hell. Having the opportunity to fix it and make it better since the disaster happened, and a year later I think was the [long pause] power outages. A year or a year and a half later there were a lot of power outages in Puerto Rico and they had the chance.

00:39:48

With no hurricane?

00:39:49

With no hurricane! There was literally no rain, it was just that an energy plant exploded. An energy plant exploded, basically. The energy plant exploded and all of Puerto Rico was turned off. Puerto Rico was in a full blackout. They had the opportunity and didn't fix it. So that's why I think that. I'm studying Electrical Engineering so that's why I- I don't know where I was going with that. [Laughs] Let's keep going.

00:40:32

What are your thoughts on how FEMA responded to the Maria disasters?

00:40:35

FEMA... FEMA is a government American thing so they responded well. They gave a lot of money so that's good. They gave a lot of stipends and all that, like relief money to the families. I think that was good and the food that they were giving, the supplies. They were doing a really great job. I don't have any complaints from FEMA.

00:41:30

I remember that some of the food the FEMA gave was military food. I don't know if you had the experience...

00:41:40

Mmm, no.

00:41:41

No? You didn't eat military food. It was pretty bad. It was like a brown package. It was like pasta, rice, and beans...

00:41:56

A brown bag? Of plastic?

00:41:57

It was a brown bag, it had the things inside. It was like- I was gonna say Quaker but it's not Quaker. It was "Avena".

00:42:10

I think that's oatmeal.

00:42:13

Oatmeal, yeah oatmeal. It had oatmeal and a lot of other things. But the point is that it was cold food, but it had a pack that you bent and it began to heat up a lot. It heated up a lot.

You

opened it and prepared what you had to prepare with the things that were inside. Then you heated it with that thing. You would think it was gonna be normal food, but it was pretty bad.

00:43:04

It didn't taste good?

00:43:05

It was pretty bad, it tasted awful.

00:43:10

What type of food did it have normally?

00:43:17

I once tasted oatmeal. I once tasted meat, I don't know how it was. But it was like meat. It was pretty bad.

00:43:37

Like ground beef?

00:43:35

I think it was like that.

00:43:38

Ground beef with... nothing else?

00:43:40

No, no. I don't know. I don't remember well. One of them was dried-out meat, that was the one that tasted...

00:43:59

Bad?

00:43:58

No, not bad.

00:43:59

Good?

00:44:00

No, not good.

00:44:01

Normal?

00:44:01

...like dog food! It tasted like dog food.

00:44:04

But it didn't taste bad?

00:44:07

Normal. [Laughs]

00:44:12

But yeah, that's one of the memories that I have of FEMA food.

00:44:18

Okay, I think that will be all for now. If I have any follow-up questions I will let you know, thank you for your time.

00:44:31

Thank you for giving me this opportunity.