

ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Gerardo Flores Colón

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Gerardo Flores Colón conducted by Claudia Camacho Flores on April 20, 2023. This interview is part of coursework 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.

Interviewer: Claudia Camacho Flores

Interviewee: Gerardo Flores Colón

Date: April 20, 2023

Location: Mayagüez, Puerto Rico

00:00:00 Claudia: Good morning, my name is Claudia Camacho Flores and today, April 20, 2023, I will be interviewing Gerardo Flores in the town of Mayagüez.

00:00:09 Gerardo: My name is Gerardo Flores Colón. I am a natural and resident of the town of San Lorenzo. I am 71 years old. I am married. I have two sons.

00:00:23 Claudia: Good Gerardo, Good morning, I hope you are well. I will be asking you some personal questions if you can answer them.

00:00:32 Gerardo: Very well, make me the ones you want.

00:00:34 Claudia: Can you tell me when you were born and where?

00:00:39 Gerardo: On July 5, 1952, in San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico.

00:00:45 Claudia: Are you an only child or do you have siblings?

00:00:52 Gerardo: I come from a family from the countryside we are twelve brothers. I am the fifth from youngest to oldest.

00:01:02 Claudia: What are the names of your parents?

00:01:04 Gerardo: My dad's name was Crescencio Flores Martínez, and my mom was called Pia Colón Flores.

00:01:11 Claudia: You told me Geraldo, that you have twelve brothers?

00:01:13 Gerardo: 12 brothers, 11 and I the 12.

00:01:16 Claudia: How was your experience having so many brothers?

00:01:20 Gerardo: Well, we were a humble country family. My mom worked in school canteens. My dad was disabled. And we depended on the work that my mother did for livelihood.

00:01:38 Claudia: What does your mom worked?

00:01:40 Gerardo: She worked on school canteens, cooking.

00:01:44 Claudia: What is your academic preparation?

00:01:48 Gerardo: Well, I did an associate degree in police sciences at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón University from 1970 to 1972 through a federal program called manpower. In that program we were the first men to enter that prestigious university that was for young ladies and for people who had financial resources to be able to study there, it was exclusively for young ladies. But in 1970, we were the first men who entered there,

a group of 37 men, one was selected from the different towns of the island. I was chosen for San Lorenzo and 7 ended up graduating from the program of police sciences.

00:02:40 Claudia: And after that.

00:02:40 Gerardo: After that, not satisfied with that, I had an aspiration to continue studying. I went to apply for the University of Puerto Rico. I was accepted in the University in the area of education. I did a college baccalaureate in education with a specialization in history and sociology. I got my high school teaching license, but I didn't perform the function as such except by giving classes at night, as it was more feasible and better economically working on other sections of the Government of Puerto Rico, which I started in the "Administración del derecho al trabajo", in the Z programs, comprehensive employment and training act in the Humacao region. From there, I went to "El Departamento de la Familia". Where I ended up working for 30 years as regional director of the department.

00:03:48 Claudia: From all your siblings, did all your siblings achieved a university education?

00:03:56 Gerardo: Given the economic situation prevailing at that time and being a family of 12, with a minimum income of a school canteen cook's salary. We had the opportunity to study up to grade 12 the ones who were interested in studying. Others did not finish, they stayed in secondary or elementary school. And I was the first in the family to get a university degree out of the 12. After me, my brother, who follows me; He studied education, he did a master's degree. My sister finished her baccalaureate in education as

well. My other brother studied nursing, and the others they stayed on as a conservation worker and working in a private company.

00:04:57 Claudia: If you could pick one person who helped you grow as a person while you were growing up. Who would you choose?

00:05:05 Gerardo: Well, the person who motivated me to keep going, was my mom with her effort and sacrifice. For me to be able to study in the universities that I named previously, I had to work on my free time. For example: In the case of the associate degree in police sciences. The manpower program paid us everything, gave us a stipend of 160 dollars a month it also paid, book, tuition, everything and at the University of Puerto Rico, I worked in the registrar's office for 2 hours. I worked weeding gardens from the residences because previously, the professors had residence there, on the university street and I got money for taking care of the gardens for livelihood, since the economic situation was very difficult.

00:06:12 Claudia: You were staying there while you were completing your academic degree?

00:06:17 Gerardo: Yes, I was staying on Robles Street, in Río Piedras. While I was completing my college degree. And I said that I had a disadvantage since I didn't have enough money to buy food, just lunch that the lodging provided, with that we had to sustain ourselves since we saw those chicken boxes with potatoes like gas drawers because we didn't have the money to buy it. There were other people who economically, since they came from privileged families, had the option of being able to enjoy all those assets that existed at that time.

00:07:05 Claudia: Well, today you agreed to tell me about your experiences about the lack of money and how difficult it was to access to food in that time, while you were completing your studies. You told me about the chicken and potato box, can you tell me more about your experience? Due to the lack of financial resources and how you got around.

00:07:33 Gerardo: We had a lot of difficulties that we had to overcome. For example, we didn't have a vehicle, on Mondays we had to use public transportation with the books and clothes from rural areas of San Lorenzo to Rio Piedra, Robles Street. We also had the problematic that we couldn't buy the books because of the economic situation. We had to go to the library to copy in the notebook, the text of the books unlike the once who economically could buy the books, they had an advantage over us. But that gave us an advantage over other people because it helped us create some values and enriched ourselves in certain aspects because we acquired orthographic and literature abilities and the responsibility of being able to comply with the classes that required the use of books. Today, there are a lot of phones, you search through Facebook and get all the information, you don't have to go anywhere. In that time, we didn't have those facilities; The ones who had them limited were the people who had access to economically resources. It wasn't easy for us to be able to get into the university because, there were people of the social status in Puerto Rico who had privileges given by the last name of your family. We had to compete unfairly with those students that came from good families to enter in Rio Piedras University.

00:10:08 Claudia: You told me that you studied at the “Recinto Universitario de Rio Piedras” what was the university like?

00:10:15 Gerardo: By then, the University was a sanctuary of respect and teaching because they were good teachers. They were dedicated people to achieve the goal that was proposed. It was an exhaustive evaluation where you were required to make sacrifices to comply for the future. In that area of education in which I found myself it was a matter of names and surnames and family and for a person with a lot of resources to achieve the opportunities not only having good grades. People with less resources had to compete in an unfair competition for them to be accepted at the university.

00:11:30 Claudia: What you are telling me is that it was very difficult for people who were not privileged to enter and complete their university studies.

00:11:41 Gerardo: That is correct. From 100 people, 5 could enter to the University. Not like now, when you are practically competing with private universities in terms of the student body, because the students understands that many times in public universities, they are wasting their time when there are people that go to the University with other interests that are not learning and acquiring knowledge to serve to the society. The student body has lost a lot because of the strikes of the unnecessary work stoppages. The student body has gone to private universities and now the University of Puerto Rico, the public University, has problems recruiting the student body required to meet federal requirements.

00:12:56 Claudia: You, while you were telling me your story and your experience at the “recinto”, you told me that you were staying at a lodging and that it provided you food during the day. What were those meals like?

00:13:11 Gerardo: Well, generally in the lodging. For example, in which I occupied during those 5 years. It was a room, where the beds were double for four students, a single closet, a breakfast of oats. And a lunch that included rice with beans, as a simple lunch. In the afternoon there was nothing to eat. The total price at that time was 60 dollars monthly for each student, but there were about four students in the room. And if you wanted a room for two students, the price would be higher and if you wanted it for one student, then the price would be very high.

00:14:13 Claudia: You told me that you had 3 companions who stay with you, what were those people like, what was it like to live with them?

00:14:25 Gerardo: Well, that is a very good experience because there you get to learn about everything, and one has the opportunity to share with others. For example, I remember even though I am 71 years old, I remember being from San Lorenzo, that person was from San Sebastián and from anecdotes, for example, a gentleman whose name was Dandearenas, Sotomayor and there was an English teacher who spoke very little Spanish, he had a lot of problems when he read the list, because due to the difficulty of that. There was another who worked at the vassal in Carolina. That one smoked, he liked marijuana and hid it under the mattress, he said to me: you can try some and something about colored lights” and me, someone who was from the countryside and had never seen that before. I said that I didn’t want to try it because I was smoking but just

cigarettes. Everyone could decide what they want to try and like. There was the president theater, which was generally on Calle de Diego where the students went. But there were others who liked to go to sex theaters of sex movies, The Look that was there, on Ponce de León. You could share with different cultures, for example from Lajas, José Miguel Toro Iturrino, who today is a lawyer here in the Mayagüez area, also studied with me, this brilliant boy but he was conservative, the other from Yabucoa who was with me, his father was a merchant. That one helped me when I was without money, he gave me money and invited me to eat a box of potatoes and chicken, because the smell of the chicken and fries when one was hungry it was terrific. We continue and thus we managed to move forward.

00:16:48 Claudia: This one about that experience with your classmates, it was quite good, and you learned, and your classmates helped you when you needed it most.

00:16:57 Gerardo: There was a riot at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus in 1972. I was a student of the Sagrado Corazón and I had the first experience where I was arrested because there was a death of a student, Antonia Martínez. Four police officers who were shot at the University. They told me, you are arrested, and I was confused because I was a student. They didn't find a cause and they didn't take me, they told me, well, go to the lodging and stay still in the lodging because tonight all the people in Rio Piedras who are throwing rocks and destroying buildings are going to be arrested. I remember that 1 of us that was in the hostel, there were 27 students and there was 1 who had a gun and had shot. I don't know if he killed someone. But nothing, I did not get involved in it, but it is an experience that I was not going to have, because I had never

seen a firearm and that person had it there. And he was a student of Natural Sciences. But why did he have it? I don't know.

00:18:34 Claudia: You told me that, apart from the food that the lodging provided you, it was quite difficult, like going out and buying what you wanted due to the lack of economic resources. I imagine that there are many people who suffer from scarce resources just like you did and right now the economy it's not good and there are a lot of people who suffer from scarce resources. If you can talk to me a little bit about how you were fed off outside your lodging. What did your mother cooked when you went to visit her?

00:19:16 Gerardo: Yes, on weekends on Friday, we finished picking up all our things and with a passage we went back to our towns. My mom was at home, we were usually a lot of people, there wasn't much to eat. Maybe legumes with a little piece of fish, bean, rice, we used to eat meat only once a month or once a week. People took advantage of the native products and the internal native foods and the meat for which they killed them, pigs and birds were killed. The rest of the time we had to eat legumes, thirsty because there was nothing else to eat. I always say that the values of the people are what make them, when you propose something, you achieve it. Right now, I finished my studies, worked and I have a family. I have a son and a daughter and a precious granddaughter who is studying in Mayagüez. Now, we are the example of them. They learn from what we went through; they know that they must take advantage of opportunities and what that sacrifice must be made because not everything comes in hand. There are people who quickly put excuses to say they can't do it, they use it to justify that they can't achieve

things, but that is a lie, you just must let go of the ego. If you say you can't, you can't, but if you say you can, you can. We have had countless examples of Puerto Rican person who has achieved an objective regardless of having social economic difficulties and have overcome them. You can prepare yourself to serve the society that needs the principles and values to take things forward. Many times, we have a problem that we must leave Puerto Rico to economically be able to be stable in terms of money. The cost of living continues to increase, how it increases in the whole world and the person must take a risk with his family, with their resources and to take an adventure.

00:22:57 Claudia: Gerardo, you told me that while you were in San Lorenzo, at your home, you ate was mostly legumes and meat if you were able to get it or kill the animal to get it. Did you harvested that vegetable and raised animals or how did you manage to get that food?

00:23:26 Gerardo: The situation was such that, to go to school, perhaps we had a pair of shoes. I used it from one day to the next, another used it the next day and the clothes it was very simple clothing, since we did not have the financial resources to be able to afford it. When we got home from school, we had to work with the animals, we had to milk the cows and look for the firewood and for the legumes that were going to be used to cook the next day. In the case of us, we had to get water from a well and fill a barrel for personal use, for the toilets and to drink. There was no refrigerator, there were no televisions and tobacco, and corn were planted, the string bean, the rice, the beans, where also harvest. Puerto Rico is a great rice producer, the land is very fertile, but no one wants to work them because it does not produce economically to be in economic competition and

generally; people decide not to till the land and buy the product from other nations that are cheaper, perhaps in terms of seed costs, labor costs, or fertilizer costs. We are staying in practically zero in agriculture, but us who were studying had to, our parents forced us to stay one day a week working on the land. I was picking tobacco, planting beans, picking beans because it was a requirement. But they were minimal amounts because perhaps we only made 20 dollars or less, but when you were going to do the calculations it was well nothing, because between seed fertilizer and seeds they were gone, but it had to be done and it was within the procedures established in the family that the girls had to stay to sew tobacco and the boys had to stay to get tobacco. All sorts of beans and all kinds of grain were picked up and with that, well, it was also a livelihood for the family, which was a native and nutritious product because it was produced without so many chemicals and without so many things. And, so, we practically grew up like that.

00:26:38 Claudia: I know that in those times many people had to grow their own products to be able to feed themselves. But was there a time when you sold these products to use the profits economically?

00:26:56 Gerardo: Generally, there is what is called the latifundio and this is what is called the boss or the foreman. He was the one who supplied the seed and the fertilizer to sow, fertilize and harvest. When it came to the sale of the product, there was practically nothing left over from the sale of that product because so much spent on compost, so much was spent on seed, so much was spent on poisoning and well. The important thing is that an amount of the Social Security was paid for that person. Later I took in 60 or 140 dollars when I reached Social Security age and that could be a great achievement for those

people, but generally, as the families did not have extensions of land to produce, they had to pay a third of what they produced, they had to give it to the owner of the farm or half of what they produced. In economic terms, it was for the owner of the farm in this case. My family, we lived on my uncle's farm and when a head of cattle was sold, the money had to be sent to the United States to him. Of what was left from the harvest, we had to give 1 % to that man, because that was the peasant law, and it was done without any contract.

00:29:01 Claudia: You mentioned at the beginning of the interview that your father was disabled. You and your brothers were the ones in charge to collect the crops, the tobacco, and the beans.

00:29:18 Gerardo: That was the case, my dad only gave the instructions, but he said, you must stay here and not go to school. There were some Christian theological myths, for example, my older brother wanted to be a lawyer and he graduated from the High School, but my mom said that for a lawyer to save his soul, had to go through the eye first, a camel through the eye of a needle, which is in the Bible, but has nothing to do with it. But that was my mom's idea. She said: I support you for the rest of your life and you don't study law. Later, in the end, he went to Mexico, but it was not possible to adapt to the Jesuit priest's meals in Guadalajara either. He went to the United States, so he managed to make a bachelor's degree in nursing, and he was able to finish retiring as a nurse. To this day, he is still alive receiving his pension. But that was part of the story, the one who passed the father's instructions to the other person in charge, who was the second, who didn't like school, because he liked agriculture. But when he noticed that he wasn't making

money by overseeing the agriculture he studied and went to the United States. People motivate me to study when they said to not take an electricity course and that it was better to get the coupons and taking the reforms. Because we live in a begging society where our parents, instead of telling us to prepare for us being profit to society and working, they told us to get married and apply for the coupons. They didn't say that you will earn your salary with the sweat of your brow. My mother always told us that we had to study a lot. The ones who studied can have a life perhaps a little longer, smoother and with a better economy.

00:31:58 Claudia: Well, Gerardo, thank you very much for allowing me to interview you today.

00:32:07 Gerardo: Generally, I understand that there are people who don't like to mention this type of stories. I always say that they serve as an example to improve themselves over other people, because my philosophy always tells the person to go to study. Once you have finished your studies, you can work. There are countless of facilities now that I know that are convenient to be able to prepare yourself to serve society positively in the future that is coming forward, we don't know what is going to happen.

00:32:43 Claudia: In short, study.

00:32:46 Gerardo: Study a lot and works and always carries forward some principles and values. You can be in a group of people who don't have positive ideas, but you can be the point of bringing them positive ideas and making them positive.

00:33:05 Claudia: Well, thank you very much, Gerardo.

00:33:06 Gerardo: Thank you.