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## Oral history interview with Juan Antonio Vélez Feneque, April 17, 2023

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## ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

### Oral History Interview with Juan Vélez Feneque

#### PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Juan Vélez Feneque conducted by Glerysbeth Chaparro Vélez on April 17, 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.

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Interviewer: Glerysbeth Chaparro Vélez

Interviewee: Juan Vélez Feneque

Date: April 17, 2023

Location: Stella Community, Rincón, PR

[ENGLISH VERSION]

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:00:00]: Are you ready?

Juan Vélez: I am ready.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What is your name and how old are you?

Juan Vélez: My name is Juan Vélez Feneque, and I am 80 years old.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Where are you from?

Juan Vélez: I am a native of Rincón, Puerto Rico.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Juan Vélez: Alive or all of them?

Glerysbeth Chaparro: All of them.

Juan Vélez: I have one brother and four sisters.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Are you the oldest or the youngest?

Juan Vélez: Youngest.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: With whom did you get along with the most?

Juan Vélez: I got along with everyone the same way.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: You didn't have a favorite sibling? [laughs]

Juan Vélez: No.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Were you a troublemaker as a child?

Juan Vélez: A little bit.

[When I asked this question we both laughed because our family is always mentioning the pranks my grandfather, Juan Vélez, used to do when he was younger.]

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Do you have any memories with your family that brings you joy? Any activity that you have had.

Juan Vélez: None.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:01:17]: In what year did you migrate to the United States?

Juan Vélez: In 1960.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: How old were you when you migrated to the United States?

Juan Vélez: Sixteen years old.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Why did you decide to leave Puerto Rico?

Juan Vélez: I was looking for a better environment and to help my mother, who was a widow. I was the youngest in the family, and I was the last one to migrate there.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Have all your brothers and sisters already gone there?

Juan Vélez: Yes, except for one.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Who stayed?

Juan Vélez: The oldest.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What was her name?

Juan Vélez: Nelda Vélez.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did she stay in order to take care of mamá Lina? [Mamá Lina is Juan Vélez 's mother].

Juan Vélez: Yes, and to also continue working here.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Which state did you move to and why?

Juan Vélez: To the state of New York.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you move to New York because you already had relatives living there?

Juan Vélez: Yes because my brother was already living there. I wrote him a letter telling him to come look for me, and he sent me the flight ticket, so I decided to go live with him.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: He is your older brother, right? The second one?

Juan Vélez: Yes, the second one.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: When you moved to the United States, did you work with him in the same place?

Juan Vélez: I worked with him for some time. In the beginning. But after a couple of years, we stopped working together.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you go alone or accompanied on your trip to the United States?

Juan Vélez: On my own.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Was it your first trip?

Juan Vélez: Yes, it was my first trip. Although there were always people from the same town. We would always form a little group and look for a public car that would take us to San Juan in order to get to New York.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Were you able to finish your studies before moving?

Juan Vélez: I did not finish them.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Would you say that one of the obstacles that you had to overcome was the language barrier? Did you find it difficult to learn English?

Juan Vélez: Yes, it was difficult for me and also because I was a minor. It was difficult for me to get a job, and they asked for a lot of experience in everything. At that age, I didn't have any experience.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: You moved and that was your first job in general? You had never worked before?

Juan Vélez: No. I was just in school studying.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you find it difficult to learn the language and communicate in English when you were working or searching for a job?

Juan Vélez: Yes, it was difficult for me.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you have to bring a resume for the job interview?

Juan Vélez: No.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: You just went and said you needed a job?

Juan Vélez: Yes.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:04:45]: What was your first job?

Juan Vélez: My first job was at a doll factory.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you like it? Was it difficult?

Juan Vélez: It was a little difficult because of the heat and the bad smell and the stench that came out of the plastic dolls. Back in the day dolls were all plastic, they were not made with cloth and plastic like they are now.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Were you the only employee of your age, or were there other workers who were also sixteen years old?

Juan Vélez: I was the only one.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Would you say you were the youngest?

Juan Vélez: Yes, but I would always put that I was older. I would say I was two years older than my actual age. [laughs]

Glerysbeth Chaparro: So that you could get hired?

Juan Vélez: Yes.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: How many jobs did you have in the United States?

Juan Vélez: During the whole time?

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Yes.

Juan Vélez: I think I had about ten. [laughs]

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you have one that you liked more than the others?

Juan Vélez: They were all more or less the same.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Wasn't there an easier or harder one?

Juan Vélez: There is always one that is easier than another. Some were difficult. I worked at night, and sometimes you would go out and find a snowfall. There were few factories that worked at night. If it was snow season and if you were the first one to go out, the snow would reach up to your waist, but I had a good time because we would throw snowballs at each other until we got to the train station, it took five to ten minutes to get there, and since we were young, we had a good time playing and pushing one another in the snow.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: When you moved out at sixteen, were you excited to see the snow?

Juan Vélez: Yes.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you move during winter or before the snow season started?

Juan Vélez: I moved before the snow season started. Around September.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: When you had your first snowfall and your first cold weather experience, it was very impactful, right?

Juan Vélez: Yes, but since I was young I liked to play in the snow, and I had a good time.

[00:07:37] Glerysbeth Chaparro: Do you have any memories where you have faced racism or discrimination?

Juan Vélez: I faced many.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Do you have any experience you would like to share?

Juan Vélez: I arrived in the United States on a Saturday, and on Monday a friend of my brother's got me an interview for a job. He took me there and explained to me how to get the bus back home if I didn't get the job. I wasn't hired because I didn't have experience, and they also saw me very young. On my way back, I took the bus. Since the streets there are so long, the trip felt longer than it should've, and I thought I missed my stop. I got off the bus at a place that belonged to Americans, where there were no Latinos around. There I had a brief encounter with some students. Since I was young, they also thought I was a student. There I had problems. They insulted me, pushed me, threw books at me. Until I was able to get away and as I ran further down the street I encountered a group of African Americans. They asked me what was wrong and defended me. They asked me where I lived, and I explained as best I could, more or less, since I had written it down. Not only that, but they told me: "We are also heading that way, but you go ahead and keep walking until you find a big circle. Next time, don't get off before you stop because it will get you into trouble if you reach a place where there is racism."

Glerysbeth Chaparro: I imagine you learned from that experience.

Juan Vélez: Yes. There was a time when I was waiting at the bus stop. When we got on the bus, we had to stay standing up because it was full. My friends said to me: "Tony, come. Sit here." There were some Italians there, and they didn't like the fact that my name was Tony. They told me: "No, No! No Puerto Rican can be named Tony" and they started throwing hands on me until we fell on the floor. [laughs]. My friends defended me, and we were able to beat up those Americans because we outnumbered them. There were about two or three of them, while there were like four of us.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:10:06]: Were those friendships from the neighborhood or from work?

Juan Vélez: They were from the neighborhood.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Were the people you socialized with around your age, or were they older?

Juan Vélez: They were of all ages, but almost always older.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:10:34]: Were there any moments where you were faced with any cultural shock? For example, some American customs that you found strange.

Juan Vélez: Sometimes in food, but other than that no.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you spend a lot of time with Hispanic people?

Juan Vélez: Yes, almost always. At the beginning, yes.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: For how long were you living in the United States?

Juan Vélez: For about 20 years.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What did you miss about Puerto Rico while living in the United States?

Juan Vélez: I missed my family, our Christmas celebrations, since they were different there, the “fiestas patronales” and many things that were not seen over there.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Was there ever a time when you felt alone in the United States?

Juan Vélez: Yes, many times.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Even though you were with your brother and sisters? They lived in the same place as you, right?

Juan Vélez: Yes, but we were almost always in separate houses. They also worked and had their own schedules.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:12:16]: What did you do when you felt lonely and wanted to avoid these emotions?

Juan Vélez: I would go to the movies, see a wrestling match and the baseball games around the area. In the United States, there are a lot of places you can go to... or go to a boxing match.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you enjoy watching boxing matches?

Juan Vélez: At that time our entertainment was boxing tournaments and I liked it a lot.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you have a favorite boxer?

Juan Vélez: No, I would just go to see them.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you find it difficult to make friends?

Juan Vélez: No. Everyone was sociable.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What would you guys do to spend time together?

Juan Vélez: We would go to parties, baseball games or play baseball or ride bicycles.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did they move to the United States for the same reasons as you?

Juan Vélez: Yes, for the same reasons at that time.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What area of Puerto Rico were they from?

Juan Vélez: They were almost always from the western area: Aguada, Mayagüez, Aguadilla and Rincón.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you have a best friend, or was it more of a friend group?

Juan Vélez: I spent most of the time hanging out with a group of friends.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What food did you miss eating when you moved to the United States?

Juan Vélez: Since we always cooked Puerto Rican food, I had no problems with that, but at work it was different. There weren't many Hispanic restaurants and fast foods didn't exist at that time.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:14:16]: And what did you do to get food while working?

Juan Vélez: When my shift was over or during work time?

Glerysbeth Chaparro: On both occasions.

Juan Vélez: During work time it was difficult because they only gave you half an hour to eat. Sometimes you would go out to eat in some restaurants, but because there was racism they would leave you for last. The half an hour was gone by the time they served you. We hardly had time to eat, and sometimes we wouldn't know how to order, but almost always, even if they knew what we wanted, they didn't listen to us because we were Hispanic. By the time they served you, the half hour was up. And you had to eat your food on the way back to work and throw away the leftovers because you couldn't eat while working.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Nobody complained about this? Everybody just accepted this behavior?

Juan Vélez: Everyone accepted it because there were very few restaurants around. There were not many options and if there were any, they were far away.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: So sometimes it wasn't worth going out for lunch and then coming back.

Juan Vélez: There were many times when I would rather eat a piece of cake with a cup of soda until it was time to get home, and you could eat a proper meal.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:16:19]: You were very fond of music.

Juan Vélez: Yes, always.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Was there a record that you listened to a lot at that time? Any singer you liked to listen to or any song?

Juan Vélez: At that time there were many good singers and trios. The music was very good at that time. It was romantic, it was jocular and danceable. The records sold out a lot. I used to go to the record stores, and sometimes you had to wait in line to buy a record, and if not they would sell out.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Were those the ones that are called vinyls, and you listened to them on a record player?

Juan Vélez: Yes, at that time they had 78 RPM vinyl records that played only one song per side. Then came the plain vinyls, and soon they changed to cassettes, and then it became CDs.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you ever get a chance to buy an album?

Juan Vélez: Yes, I got to buy a lot of them.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What was the name of the first album you bought?

Juan Vélez: The first ones I bought were called Trío San Juan and Trío Los Panchos. I like a lot of trio music. I always liked them.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Do you go out dancing a lot?

Juan Vélez: Yes, I spent my time dancing. Everywhere I went, there was a dance hall nearby.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Is that how you met some of your friends?

Juan Vélez: No, they were all from the neighborhood.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Why did you decide to move back to Puerto Rico?

Juan Vélez: To stay?

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Yes.

Juan Vélez: Things were changing there, and it was not the same as here. It is more dangerous to raise children there, and I already had two. I decided it was better to raise them in Puerto Rico because it is less dangerous, and it was better for them.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you think it was a more family-friendly environment?

Juan Vélez: Yes, more family-friendly and safer.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Do you have any funny memories with your friends? I imagine that all your friends were like you and liked to play around.

Juan Vélez: Not back then [laughs]. There was more respect.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:19:02]: When you came back to Puerto Rico, did many of your friends come back as well or did they stay in the United States?

Juan Vélez: Almost all of them moved back by that time. From 1978 to the 80s, many began to return to Puerto Rico.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Have you kept in contact with any of them?

Juan Vélez: Yes, always. With those who are from this area in Rincón, but not with the ones that lived in another town.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: When you worked in the factories, were there employees who were not Hispanic or American? That were from other countries like Europe.

Juan Vélez: Yes, most of them.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did the majority of the employees form part of a minority?

Juan Vélez: Yes, and most of them were Europeans.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did they socialize with you guys, or did they stay within their cultural group?

Juan Vélez: Everyone socialized with one another.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: When you first moved to the city, did you get lost?

Juan Vélez: Yes, many times [laughs].

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Was it because of the subway?

Juan Vélez: Yes, because of the subway. I had an experience where I left a work meeting because I didn't understand what they were saying in English and decided to go back home. At that time, I was working with my brother, and he told me, "You're going to get lost." but by then I knew how to take the train. It was summer and it was hot. I decided to go alone because the train was able to drop me off near my house, but with bad luck I fell asleep. When I woke up, the train was already in the train parking lot. I was buried under the ground. And with the heat in there and alone, I didn't know what to do. There were people washing the trains and I could see them from afar using a pressure washing machine. And I shouted, "HEY, HEY!" and they didn't hear because they had their radios on, plus the noise that was coming from the pressure washing machine was very loud. I was already hungry, and I was locked in for like three hours. It was like an underground city. It was Saturday and based on their schedule, I knew the train didn't run until at least Monday. Between now and Monday, I would die of hunger and thirst. By the work of God, I felt the train move and I said: "Damn, the train is moving!". I don't know how because there was no one on the train. Since the train was short, I checked it from the back to front and there was no one inside. I don't know who came in. At that time, I didn't think about it. I was just happy because the train moved. I went outside and recognized the name of the station. It was near the airport, and I realized it was the last stop the train was taking. I still think that it was God that helped me get out of there because there was no one on that train conducting it. I don't know how the train got me there. By the time I got home, my brother was back from the meeting and anxiously waiting for me. He got angry at me and said: "I told you not to go alone".

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Yes, especially since there were no cell phones to call and ask for help.

Juan Vélez: Yes, and I was crying like a baby because I was hungry. I thought that the train wouldn't run until Monday and that I was going to starve to death. That was my greatest fear, but luckily something moved the train.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: That happened on a Friday?

Juan Vélez: On a Saturday.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: I imagine you were scared.

Juan Vélez: I was crying like a baby [laughs]. There were still people there, but far away. They had radios with music and the pressure washing machine going, "PRRRRRRRRP!". Even if I yelled, they couldn't hear me. On both sides: if I looked to the left there were trains, and the right side was full of trains too. And since the pressure washing machine made a lot of noise, they put the radio volume on high. They weren't able to hear me.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: It was a miracle that it moved.

Juan Vélez: It was a miracle, I say, but at that moment I said: "Damn, it was God who moved it" because there was nobody there and the train was short. When there are a few people to pick up at the train station, the trains tend to be shorter. Not like the ones during the week, which were long. I didn't see anyone get in to conduct the train. I don't know how it moved.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: You fell asleep, and they didn't see you while putting the train away?

Juan Vélez: I went to sleep, and they didn't see me. Or maybe they did it to me on purpose.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Maybe.

Juan Vélez: Maybe they said: "Look, this is a Latino. Let's leave him there."

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:25:34]: What area of New York did you live in?

Juan Vélez: At first, when I arrived, I lived in Brooklyn. After Brooklyn, I moved to Long Island, New York. Then I lived in a neighborhood in Manhattan. Then I moved to West Side Washington, New York. That was the last place I lived in. I never lived in the Bronx.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: When you rented those apartments, were they like now, where you pay a lot of money for a tiny little room?

Juan Vélez: Back then, they used to be very cheap. I used to pay ten dollars a week for a room. Ten or twelve. They were quite big, with everything included: electricity and water.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Ten dollars back in the day is equivalent to how much in today's economy?

Juan Vélez: Nowadays, those apartments would be about two hundred dollars or more.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: And depending on the area as well.

Juan Vélez: Yes, that also.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did you have any pets?

Juan Vélez: No.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Was it because the landlord didn't let you, or was it because you had no interest in them?

Juan Vélez: I had no interest in them because I lived alone.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What was the name of the album you mentioned earlier?

Juan Vélez: The music album?

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Yes.

Juan Vélez: At that time, the record that was in was "Camino Verde". I always liked trio music, and then I expanded my music taste to a little bit of salsa and merengue and all that. No! First merengue and then a little bit of salsa. Nowadays, I enjoy all kinds of music.

Glerysbeth Chaparro [00:27:28]: Did you learn to dance by yourself, or was it your brother who taught you?

Juan Vélez: I learned by myself. Sometimes I would go out to dance halls, and I didn't dare to dance [laughs]. When the party was ending, that's when I started dancing. I was scared of dancing because I was kind of a "jíbaro". Sometimes the dance would be over, and you never had the guts to ask someone to dance with you. Before, life there was very different. You would go to a house and a dance would quickly form. You would invite someone over, and you would quickly take out your records. The owner of the house was the first one to start dancing, and then everyone would join in. This happened wherever you went.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: There was a lot of joy.

Juan Vélez [00:28:39]: Life was good, and friendships were genuine. Very different from now a day. Everybody treated each other well. Although at that time it was bad, because there were a lot of gangs. It was prime time for gangs and drugs. The gangs were not like they are now. I lived in a place in Brooklyn that was known for its gangs. There was a park where gangs went to fight. I was stuck for a whole weekend, two days, without eating because two gangs started fighting during the whole night. They were fighting Thursday, Friday and Saturday. I couldn't go out because they were bombing the street. It was a bottle that they poured gasoline into, and then they would throw it and when the glass bottle broke, it set the street on fire. Those were big gangs. They were not formed by ten or twenty people, they were gangs of one hundred or two hundred individuals. They took the whole block and the whole street, but they didn't mess with me or anybody that wasn't in the gang. I had a lot of friends who were in gangs, and they would give me advice. They would tell me that if you joined them, you couldn't get out. When there was a gang fight a train would arrive with ten or thirty gang members. Then another train would arrive in ten or fifteen minutes later with twenty more. That street was filled to the brim with people beating one another with belts. At that time people wouldn't shoot because if you killed someone they would put you in the electric chair. It was by "correazo limpio". The guys were tough. The fights were composed of punching people and beating them with pipes, bats or with whatever they could find. No revolver because if they killed someone they were punished by the electric chair, you know what I mean?

Glerysbeth Chaparro: And no one called the police?

Juan Vélez: They would arrive with the firemen, and they would use the water pressure that would come out of their hose to break up the fight. They would interrupt the fight. The firemen

would hit them with the that strong current of water and would make them stop fighting, but after a while they would start fighting again [laughs].

Glerysbeth Chaparro: When the firefighters left, they would come back again?

Juan Vélez: Yes, they would come back again. They were really tough. Those guys were really crazy. They never ran from a fight because if you got into a gang at that time you had to fight with them. You also couldn't go looking for trouble or cause any problems either, but when you got in a fight... You had to defend yourself with whatever you could, and you couldn't run. That's what my gang friends used to tell me: "Don't ever get into a gang because you have to fight all the time."

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Were you ever invited to join a gang?

Juan Vélez: No, never. They advised me not to.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did your gang friends ever regret their decision?

Juan Vélez: Many died and were imprisoned.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: For the same fights you mentioned?

Juan Vélez: [says yes with his head].

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What were the origins of the gangs?

Juan Vélez: Sometimes they were Puerto Ricans, sometimes they were Italians, sometimes they were African Americans, and sometimes they were mixed. One was called the Apaches and there were about three hundred of them. They were big. The trains would be filled with them when they went to fight. [laughs].

Glerysbeth Chaparro: And what were they called? The Apaches?

Juan Vélez: The Apaches. There was one that was called Maus-Maus and that was formed by African Americans. There was another one called Scorpion. We are talking about big gangs filled with tough people.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Were the gangs similar to the ones portrayed in movies, where they had their own colors?

Juan Vélez: Yes, and they had their presidents, secretaries and everything.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: As well as symbols?

Juan Vélez: Yes, there was almost always a symbol. There was also another one called Alacranes. There were many big gangs. People from the Bronx would go to fight in Brooklyn, where I lived. That's where they always fought because there was a park there. A huge park. That's where they used to fight. But sometimes before they even got to the park, they were already fighting. Sometimes they would meet on the train, and they would start to hit one other. Before they got to the park, they were already fighting. [laughs]

Glerysbeth Chaparro: The fights were not announced, were they?

Juan Vélez: They were not announced. They were definitely doing something; I don't know if they were abusing a child or something. If they were abusing a child, they were looking for trouble. Or a girl. If they raped a girl and if that girl was the sister of someone in a gang, you got into a lot of trouble because that's how it all started. Also, when someone was killed or died because of something, and you went to their funeral for their wake, it was dangerous because fights would break out. Those guys were so bad that they would go into the funeral home and spit in the dead man's face. A huge fight would break out because members of the gang were there too. Outside and inside. There was an occasion where I was trying to exit the funeral home, and they quickly surrounded me. They quickly surrounded me because I was a person of color. The person that died belonged to a gang formed by African Americans. The brother of the dead man worked with me, and so they let me in. After we left we saw the glass of the funeral home on the floor and someone got in, took the coffin and turned it upside down with the dead body and everything. [laughs] Then, four and five of them snuck in, maybe dressed as a woman and BOOM. It was winter, and we had to leave our coats and come back for them the other day because they were fighting, the windows were flying.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did they leave the dead man lying there?

Juan Vélez: We could not go back in. I said to my brother: "Let's go, let's go!" It was so cold that we went to drink a beer in front of the funeral home. Then we realized that there was glass lying on the floor, and we saw someone flip the coffin. I think the guy dressed as a woman in order to get in. We weren't going to take any chances. Those guys were crazy. You could see the chairs, tables, pearls and wreaths flying down the street. I went to two of those gang funerals. I went to one that was the brother of a guy I worked with, and someone from another gang broke in and spat on the dead man's face. When we saw that, we immediately left. I never went to gang members burials again because it was too dangerous.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Something always happens.

Juan Vélez: Yes, and if they catch you there, they are going to teach you salsa. I think they disguise themselves as women to get in without getting caught, and BOOM! They spit in the dead man's face. They do that to pick a fight with them, and then there's a mess with the punching and glass everywhere. They were crazy. That was dangerous. Many mothers suffered because their children arrived home in disarray. They would get beat up because they couldn't run from a fight, or else they would be thrown out of the gang. If you belonged to a gang, you had to fight until the very end even if the police arrived or until you were killed. You couldn't run, you had to fight. You hit the opponent with a stick or with whatever you could find. Mothers suffered a lot and fathers too because they came home all ruffed up. A beat-up face or even head injuries. My friend's son was caught by an opposing gang, and they stabbed his eye with a pool cue, and it wouldn't come out.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Did he go to the hospital?

Juan Vélez: Yes, he had to go to the hospital to have it removed because they used a lot of force when stabbing him and hey, he didn't go blind.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: So lucky!

Juan Vélez: So lucky!

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Why did they do that to him?

Juan Vélez: Because the kid was in a gang.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: They attacked him just for being part of a gang?

Juan Vélez: I don't know if they were fighting or what exactly happened. He was from Aguadilla. The guy was really crazy. They didn't like each other at all. There are many out there who are still in jail. There is one who was called "The Asparagus Man" because he was really bad, and another one was called "Dracula". That one was really bad.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Was he a killer?

Juan Vélez: They were crazy guys. There was one, I don't know if it was Dracula, who was taken to the back of the patrol car and the guard told him: "Look, you are a young boy, get out of the gang. If you kill someone, they're going to put you in the electric chair, and they're going to kill you. Don't keep living like this" and they took pity on the boy and even took off his handcuffs off, but the boy saw a hammer on the back seat of the patrol car and grabbed it and hit the Guard with it. [laughs]. I think he's still in jail. He was bad.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Without a doubt.

Juan Vélez: After they treated him so well and even bought him food before taking him to court. They would tell him: "Look, don't get involved in gangs, you are young, and you should focus on your studies. If you kill someone, they will put you in the electric chair". They even took off his handcuffs, so he could eat. He spotted a hammer in the car; someone must have left it behind, and then BAM! He hit the driver. They almost got killed. [laughs] Many became pastors. There was once a guy named Nicky Cruz, I don't know if he is still a pastor, but he was a big religious figure. He was bad news. I'm not sure if that was the one with the hammer blow. But I think he was the one who hammered the guard. There's another one called the "Umbrella Man" and "Dracula". There are a few of them. They were bad. I'm talking about known Puerto Ricans gang members because when it comes to the Americans...

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Many of them, I imagine.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: What was the name of the Puerto Rican gang?

Juan Vélez: They used to be called the Apaches. They were a big, big, big gang, three or four hundred members. They had members in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn. If you went on a train the days they came to fight, you knew they traveled all the way from Brooklyn or Manhattan, since it was full. They had members everywhere. Before they would even get to the place, they would fight [laughs].

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Who was the main enemy of the Apaches?

Juan Vélez: I don't know, I don't even know why they fought. It was over any little thing. For a rape or if someone was abusive towards their elders. If they hit an elder, the individual would risk of them being friends with someone in a gang. Since they were a big group, the fight would start with five or six people and then there would be a hundred or two hundred people fighting. It looked like an army.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: And you could see them from your window?

Juan Vélez: Yes because they would go to the park in front of my apartment to fight. One time it started over a kid. The boy was playing with a ball and the ball fell on a property dominated by African Americans, and then one of the colored people living there beat up the boy for looking for the ball and "TOMA!" He hit a little boy; he was about ten years old. He hit him. That's when they stayed for three days because they hit someone from a gang. That was on Thursday, and they were fighting Thursday, Friday and Saturday, three days. And I went about two days without eating because I couldn't get out of there because there were so many of them. From here to there they were Hispanic and from here to there they were African Americans, and the kid went to the African American side, and I don't know what he did that made the man hit him. And that's why they were fighting for 3 days. The street seemed to light up with those bombs. If you get hit with one of those bombs, you could get burned. I could have gone to eat with my brother at the restaurant, but since they were fighting right outside my door, I couldn't. [laughs]

Glerysbeth Chaparro: There was no way you could go past them.

Juan Vélez: No, because they throw one of those bombs at you, the gasoline would get everywhere and ignites everything. That was called Molotov bombs. The glass bottles, when they were thrown, would ignite and explode because they had gasoline in them and the whole street would catch fire. Then the firemen would come and hit you with that strong water current coming from the hose. There were a lot of firemen trying to break up the fight. That water pushes you as if it were a broom. They would leave in half an hour and come back again. The force of the water would push you as if you were nothing. And they would leave and in half an hour they would start fighting again. [laughs] And I said: "What if I don't have time to get back home and meet them on my way back or what if the firemen mistake me for a member and discharge me with that high pressure of water". Every once in a while the firemen would get in, so they wouldn't fight, but they are really tough since they would come back again after they left. Men and women, not just men. They were always joining them in battle, not one or two. There could be fifty or a hundred women. Crazy women.

Glerysbeth Chaparro: Thank you very much for the interview, Papá.