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## Oral history interview with Wilson Rodríguez Olmeda, November 25, 2023

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## ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

### Oral History Interview with Wilson Rodríguez Olmeda, November 25, 2023

#### PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Wilson Rodríguez Olmeda conducted by Fernando Hidalgo Rodríguez on November 25, 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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#### Transcript

Interviewer: Fernando Hidalgo Rodríguez

Interviewed: Wilson Rodríguez Olmeda

Date: November 25, 2023

Location: Orocovis, Puerto Rico

1 (Fernando)

00:00:01,360 --> 00:00:38,760

Good evening, my name is Fernando Hidalgo Rodríguez. Today's date would be November 25, 2023, my concentration would be software engineering at the University of Puerto Rico of Mayagüez, I am in the creative writing course and right now I am in Orocovis, Puerto Rico conducting the interview for my Oral History project. I will be interviewing my grandfather, Wilson Rodríguez Olmeda about the refugee crisis. Good evening Wilson.

14(Wilson)

00:00:37,760 -->00:00:41,120

Good evening, Fernando.

16(Fernando)

00:00:41,120 --> 00:00:46,360

He would be my grandfather and nothing. Have your Permission to record this interview?

18(Wilson)

00:00:48,480 --> 00:00:55,520

You have it, yes, okay.

19(Fernando)

00:00:52,160 --> 00:01:08,080

We are not going to start with some basic questions to get to know you little and so that the audience knows more you. When and where were you born?

23(Wilson)

00:01:03,359 --> 00:01:12,600

I was born in Orocovis, in the Pelleja neighborhood on December 22, 1942.

26(Fernando)

00:01:15,360 --> 00:01:21,400

You grew up in the same place where you were born right?

27(Wilson)

00:01:19,000 --> 00:01:26,720

No, I didn't grow up in the same place because my father and mother moved to the town when I was barely three or four years old.

31(Fernando)

00:01:30,400 --> 00:01:37,200

And where are you living now? Do you live alone or with someone?

32(Wilson)

00:01:33,399 --> 00:01:39,399

I live alone in the Sabana neighborhood in Orocovis.

33(Fernando)

00:01:37,200 --> 00:01:39,399

Are you working?

34(Wilson)

00:01:39,399 --> 00:01:47,000

No, I'm not working anymore. I retired when I turned 65 years old.

36(Fernando)

00:01:47,000 --> 00:01:53,840

Okay, and what did you work on?

37(Wilson)

00:01:50,759 --> 00:02:11,200

I worked for myself, first as an elementary school teacher in Barranquitas and Orocovis and then I set up an auto parts business. I was 18 years old there and then I went into construction.

45(Fernando)

00:02:14,319 --> 00:02:22,440

Okay, did you get to study after high school?

46(Wilson)

00:02:19,200 --> 00:02:24,160

Yes, I studied a bachelor's degree in education, a BBA.

48(Fernando)

00:02:24,160 --> 00:02:31,319

Okay this one, what would be your hobbies or pastimes like that?

50(Wilson)

00:02:31,319 --> 00:02:44,360

I mostly play dominoes after I retired and play pool and go out and talk to my friends and family.

54(Fernando)

00:02:44,360 --> 00:02:50,720

Y antes de eso, en tu juventud así, ¿Qué te gustaba hacer?

55(Wilson)

00:02:47,760 --> 00:03:18,120

Well, in my youth, I had to work because there weren't that many hobbies to do. The mother and father had to help do the housework. Bring help her get water, run errands. That was the job as a boy when I grew up.

63(Fernando)

00:03:18,120 --> 00:03:25,400

So, you think that now, before it was, that is, young people were busier than those of today.

64(Wilson)

00:03:25,400--> 00:04:01,360

Well, we were busier because we had to pay more attention to the houses. We had to go by what our parents told us. If they had to be at the house at 7 at night, we had to be at 7 at night because there was no theater, there were no places where one could have fun, there was no money either. It was extreme poverty that was experienced at that time and one was under the command of one's father and mother.

78(Fernando)

00:04:01,360 --> 00:04:06,720

Okay, Huh. What was the house like where you grew up?

81(Wilson)

00:04:09,599 --> 00:04:24,400

The wooden house. It was always made of wood where I grew up and where I was born, but it was a humble and simple house.

85(Fernando)

00:04:24,400 --> 00:04:34,400

And is this house still standing?

87(Wilson)

00:04:30,120 --> 00:04:40,479

Yes, where I spent most of my time since I was young, the house still exists.

89(Fernando)

00:04:40,479 --> 00:04:48,000

Okay, and do you own the house or do you have some kind of?

90(Wilson)

00:04:43,639 --> 00:04:50,080

No, where I grew up was my dad's and my mom's property.

92(Fernando)

00:04:50,080 --> 00:04:56,560

Okay, do you think you had a difficult childhood?

94(Wilson)

00:04:56,840 --> 00:05:02,520

Yes, at that time childhood was difficult because you had to work because when you started you were already taking your first steps and going to school. After school, I had to come and help my mother with the housework or go to the river to wash clothes and bring her clothes. That was the job they had at that time.

104(Fernando)

00:05:29,039 --> 00:05:33,560

So, it wasn't easy.

105(Wilson)

00:05:30,479 --> 00:06:08,039

It wasn't easy because, uh, there was extreme poverty at that time when I was growing up. The roads were there, they were mostly roads, almost every road there was no road. They were not paved, there was no asphalt, you had to walk barefoot because there were no shoes, shorts and so on, it was life when one grew up at that time.

117(Fernando)

00:06:08,039 --> 00:06:15,000

Did you go through stages of hunger, that is, like you didn't have any?

119(Wilson)

00:06:15,000 --> 00:06:49,039

Well, not hunger, but I did need some food that one wanted because one had to be under the command of my father and my mother, what we had to eat was what they made at home and what they served to them. one. If you were left hungry, then my mother would make you some cookies or something with a chocolate at night and then you would solve one problem at least, but you were hungry and you said, I didn't pass, thank God.

131(Fernando)

00:06:49,039 --> 00:06:54,000

This, tell me one of your best memories during your youth.

133(Wilson)

00:06:49,039 --> 00:07:34,160

The best memories of my youth are that it was a healthy life. Other people lived with great honesty and great respect for others. Eh, you had to be there at 7 at night to pray the Holy Rosary every night and have extraordinary discipline. And that today made me the person I am today. That discipline that my father and my mother gave me.

146(Fernando)

00:07:34,160 --> 00:07:39,919

Do you think that young people today have it easier?

147(Wilson)

00:07:37,199 --> 00:08:20,159

Yes, today's youth has everything, all the comforts, their parents have it all at hand. We sacrifice a lot for them so that they have what we did not have at that time. They are very well. There are many opportunities for many scholarships, many car facilities at that time, since everything was on foot but today's youth is much more comfortable today. Anyone who doesn't study is because they don't want to study.

164(Fernando)

00:08:20,159 --> 00:08:26,520

Did you have both parents throughout your youth?

166(Wilson)

00:08:26,520 --> 00:08:34,039

Yes, thank God I left my house and married, living with my father and mother. Thanks God.

168(Fernando)

00:08:34,039 --> 00:08:41,240

Good thing, did you have any influence on this while growing up, so what if?

170(Wilson)

00:08:41,240 --> 00:08:44,920

My influence was my father and my mother, we had to take the advice they gave us, it was the best influence one had, one could not take advice from anyone on the street, other than respecting those people, both children and adults and everyone alike. But the influence was my father and my mother.

179(Fernando)

00:09:02,680 --> 00:09:09,000

This and apart from your parents, you didn't see anyone like that.

181(Wilson)

00:09:09,000 --> 00:09:34,800

Good for older people with with capacity. For example, I mostly always liked this in the afternoons so after lunch I could meet with older people. I was never mostly with people my age. I always grew up with people older than older than me.

189(Fernando)

00:09:34,800 --> 00:09:40,160

Okay, this one, tell me the best lesson you've ever learned.

191(Wilson)

00:09:40,160 --> 00:10:11,640

Well, be humble, be simple, hardworking, work. Work with a lot of honesty, with a lot of emphasis to have a goal and that goal is to be comfortably well when you are of age. Have a good pension, if you work with the government, have a good pension. Be comfortable for when old age arrives, the difficult years.

200(Fernando)

00:10:11,640 --> 00:10:17,880

Do you think that the government in the old days helped the community more or that that has changed over time?

204(Wilson)

00:10:24,519 --> 00:11:00,000

The government helped people a lot because of the economic situation they were going through, I imagine, at that time. Now they do help more because they are more attentive to the voter, it is more political, they help more but it is because of politics, but they help those who belong to those who are in power mostly. To those who belong to other parties, they scold us, they don't treat us the same.

2159(Fernando)

00:11:00,000 --> 00:11:08,920

What was your first job?

216(Wilson)

00:11:03,880 --> 00:12:25,959

My first job was this part-time job as I say. I had to, I got my license when I was 16 and I had to take agricultural products to the Santurce market every Tuesday, I was from Rio Piedras selling with a man who gave me two or three pesos to guide his truck to Rio Piedras and Santurce. But then when I graduated from college, I emigrated to the United States. There I worked in a factory that ironed women's socks and I was there for about 2 or so years. That was when I was 16 years old. That was after I graduated from high school in 1962. Did you like that first job of being a truck driver? I liked it because at least they gave me two or three pesos and at that time two or three pesos was a lot of money. But I had to give that money to my mother, I couldn't handle it so my mother would buy products for the house, any little thing that she would take away for others to feed the younger siblings.

243(Fernando)

00:12:25,959 --> 00:12:34,040

OK. And did you like that one about ironing socks?

245(Wilson)

00:12:34,040 --> 00:12:40,639

I liked it because I earned good money, but I had to be very strong because I had to work; I had just 18 years old or 19 and I had to work from 10 at night until 6 in the morning. I didn't like it very much because of the hours but I did earn good money.

(Fernando)

00:12:59,800 --> 00:13:05,959

Over the course of your life, how many professions have you had?

256(Wilson)

00:13:05,959 --> 00:13:42,680

Well, professions, the only one I have had is the high school degree that I obtained at the Interamerican University, a BBA education that I worked as a teacher, then I studied some courses at the engineering school in Hato Rey. There I became a contractor and worked until I was 65 in construction. But I call it a profession, well, that's also engineering work, and construction.

268(Fernando)

00:13:42,680 --> 00:13:48,880

And as a job itself, how many have you had?

269(Wilson)

00:13:46,120 --> 00:14:19,519

Well, I work, because after I finished high school, I worked as a teacher in the towns of Barranquitas and Orocovis. By 1976, well, I started an auto part little by little and I spent 18 years in the auto part. Then I set up the construction company and I was there in construction until I was 65 years old.

279(Fernando)

00:14:19,519 --> 00:14:25,880

Okay this one. And did you always like that construction thing?

281(Wilson)

00:14:25,880 --> 00:15:10,880

I liked that, yes. And I still like it. Yes, and I also liked auto parts a lot because it brought me a lot of money, it gave me good benefits and thank God because I raised my family with my wife who was also a teacher and we bought one of the buildings that Nowadays my children take care of it and we are there, thank God and thanks to that auto part job, we turned out very well, thank God. We were able to educate our children as well.

295(Fernando)

00:15:10,880 --> 00:15:16,800

Do you think that you had a lot of confusion when trying to choose something to work on something that you really like?

297(Wilson)

00:15:16,800 --> 00:15:52,360

No, it wasn't a lot of confusion because well, confusion is at the beginning, it's what you learn, everything is confusing and everything work related is confusing at the first months or years. It is a risk too, but in business it is a risk, but after one masters it and learns and the interest that one shows. If you show a lot of interest and a lot of emphasis, then everything becomes easier, okay. There is no confusion whatsoever.

310(Fernando)

00:15:52,360 --> 00:16:00,279

Have you ever been or felt like you were going to be homeless?

312(Wilson)

00:16:00,279 --> 00:16:22,040

Don't mind, I never thought about that. I always thought positively when I got married, this was the first thing when I was three years old. In my wife's name, we made a loan and we built a house with the teachers' retirement and we built a house thank God.

318(Fernando)

00:16:22,040 --> 00:16:28,240

But just like you never had to live on the street.

320(Wilson)

00:16:28,240 --> 00:16:32,560

No, no, no, thank the Lord.

321(Fernando)

00:16:29,519 --> 00:16:42,920

Is there a specific reason why what happened or what you thought or why you didn't stay on the street?

325(Wilson)

00:16:42,920 --> 00:17:06,439

No, I always always applied what my father and mother told me that you had to work in life, you had to fight and be honest, be a worker and whoever is honest and is a worker and has no, no, no vices, no no kind of vice and I never feared being left homeless and without anything, thank God.

334(Fernando)

00:17:06,439 --> 00:17:14,039

eh, Do you have a related family member or friend who has become homeless?

336(Wilson)

00:17:14,039 --> 00:17:20,559

Well, family, I have a brother of mine who lives under plan eight in the United States. But that's because of his bad bad practices. By continuing to follow bad advice and bad bad habits vice The vices.

344(Fernando)

00:17:39,160 --> 00:17:57,679

This one yes. You consider that the vices and, uh, the lack of discipline. eh and those are like very big factors in how a person moves forward.

348(Wilson)

00:17:57,679 --> 00:18:57,320

What happens is that people allow themselves to be influenced. At that time, we let ourselves be influenced by our parents. They followed the advice that our mother and father gave us or our older brother because nowadays most people allow themselves to be influenced by what they are told on the street. Example of one's children, one advises them and guides them on the right path. I say I don't have that problem because thank God my children are all fine and have followed the discipline of their father and mother and we are fine thank God. For example, I have seen other people who have followed bad examples, both professional and non-professional, and they find themselves homeless because they have also had the government give them everything too.

371(Fernando)

00:18:57,320 --> 00:19:10,440

Let's talk now about the main topic. What do you think are the main causes of this crisis of refugees from people like this on the street?

375(Wilson)

00:19:10,440 --> 00:20:10,159

But if we are going to talk about refugees, for the most part, I don't have much to talk about because most of the refugees are people who are low-income or who live in wooden houses, who are very poor or who live in flood-prone areas. That's mostly because the government is the one that deals with it, the municipal government, the State Government, FEMA, the Federal Government, it's mostly the ones that deal with these people who are left homeless and things like that. The bad, the bad planning of the government also that they build houses in flood zones and then the government also has to be burdened with the people who are left homeless and homeless.

396(Fernando)

00:20:10,159 --> 00:20:18,120

What is the impact of the refugee crisis on individuals, families and communities? Or what do you think is the impact?

399(Wilson)

00:20:20,760 --> 00:21:52,080

The impact is true because one suffers as poor people who do not have enough resources, they have to depend on other people for other help and it is when they want to give it to them, not when they want. One suffers because one sees how those people treat them, huh. They don't take care of him properly as they have to take care of him and then they send them home after the crisis passes, they send him home and they forget to be there for them and they don't stay there. They are still for example we are going to put the case of the of the of the damaged of Maria, there are still people with the roofs these of the the roofs these with with the with the blue thrush. They can't, they can't, they can't do anything because they ask for documents, and they ask for documents, and they ask for documents. Now they have to do if they don't have writing because they don't care about them either. In other words, it happens like Cain's, as we say in the countryside. One well, one suffers that because one sees poor families with children, one, one, the one who feels something that has to face God, well, one also has to suffer for them as well.

432(Fernando)

00:21:52,080 --> 00:21:58,159

Yes, it's not just the people who stay on the street, it's not just because it doesn't have to be strictly because of vice.

435(Wilson)

00:22:00,240 --> 00:22:13,919

Well, one cannot be selfish in life, one also has to help those people if they need something and one can help us because we must also shake hands because we are brothers, we are all children of God and we all need them.

441(Fernando)

00:22:13,919 --> 00:22:18,480

Yes, sometimes there are causes that are beyond our control and that can also happen to anyone.

445(Wilson)

00:22:22,799 --> 00:22:32,799

Exactly. Well today we are here and tomorrow we are not there. Today one may be well financially but tomorrow you don't know where you are going to end up.

450(Fernando)

00:22:32,799 --> 00:22:38,960

Yes, no one knows what is going to happen tomorrow.

451(Wilson)

00:22:36,120 --> 00:22:41,720

Exactly, it's like death, it doesn't know the time or the day or the date or anything.

453(Fernando)

00:22:41,720 --> 00:22:46,440

You have to be grateful because you also have to have a little bit of luck to not be like this.

456(Wilson)

00:22:48,919 --> 00:23:26,400

In life one cannot be so selfish because if one is well and one sees that one's neighbor who is a little older has needs and one can help him, one must help him. Because they are also children of God and everything that one has, Health, if God gave him a little money, he was lucky, as people say, if he was lucky, I don't believe in luck, I believe. in work, in honesty, in respect. Dad God gives you luck, if you work and are honest and honest, dad God will help you whatever he wants.

470(Fernando)

00:23:26,400 --> 00:23:31,520

What do you think are the challenges that refugees face in terms of resentment, integration, and access to basic services?

475(Wilson)

00:23:39,880 --> 00:25:30,360

The challenges that I that I are like I told you before, that they depend on other people. Especially from the municipal government, which is the one that immediately attends to it. Then the municipal government depends on the State government and after the State government it depends on the Federal Government, so there are three steps that must be followed there. So, the refugee can't do anything, he has to wait for them to decide who to give it to and unfortunately in this country. I say, I say unfortunately because it exists and it is true that they evaluate it by politics, by the color of their identity. If it is not the color of that, they leave it for last, if it is left over, if not, may God distribute luck. What situation can a homeless person be in? Well, there are people who choose when they get tired of asking and asking and no one helps them, and they have children and other things. Sometimes they choose to take their own lives, which is not an option either, but since they do not have studies, they are not and they see that they are so suffocated that no one helps them, abandoned by

the government, both municipal, state and state, so they choose to take their own lives. other things. That is not the solution but unfortunately taking one's life is taken, it says here here here here the problems are over.

(Fernando)

00:25:30,360 --> 00:25:36,240

What do you think the policies and practices of different countries should be to resolve this crisis?

515(Wilson)

00:25:43,440 --> 00:25:48,039

There's so much paperwork and people who deal with refugees as soon as they have a problem should be attended to immediately but not leave everything until the last. And that they take care of this from the beginning until the problem is resolved, and that they do not leave it halfway. In other words, half of it is that they were in the shelter and they were sheltered. If a problem arose and then they sent them to the houses themselves and then they abandoned it and did not do more things, the governments had to be more attentive to the people.

534(Fernando)

00:26:39,039 --> 00:26:50,640

So, how do you think that we as citizens can contribute to understanding and acceptance among refugees and populations thus welcomed?

538(Wilson)

00:26:50,640 --> 00:28:12,559

Well, human beings have a gift from God and it is the gift of being humble, being good and understanding, and helping other people. It doesn't matter if there is a crisis, if you are damaged or if you are poor, if you see someone on the street, or if a person who is addicted helps you, they ask you for help, so give it to them and to the extent that you can give it. I know that sometimes they ask for it for drug addictions but that is their problem there one gives it from the heart. I believe that citizens, if emphasis were placed on being better citizens and being better people in schools, it would help to advise those weaker people so that they at least fight and work and have and rise. Still, everyone has the right to get up and everyone has the right to work and progress as well.

562(Fernando)

00:28:12,559 --> 00:28:18,640

Do you think that, even if someone falls this low, there is a way to recover and move forward?

564(Wilson)

00:28:18,640 --> 00:29:27,919

Of course, God did not make everyone the same. We have a mind, we have intelligence, we have gifts. We have this uh physical and mental strength. All the people who have fallen rich and are now poor and there are poor people who were poor poor poor and became rich. I thank God I am not rich but thank God based on my education that my father gave me and my mother is not a university student but rather this education of humility, simplicity, and respect. Well, any person who falls who is down can get up if the person is interested in getting up, everything depends on the person.

585(Fernando)

00:29:27,919 --> 00:29:34,200

Do you think there is discrimination or some type of injustice towards refugees?

586(Wilson)

00:29:32,480 --> 00:29:38,720

Of course yes, as in politics that exists, in politics discrimination exists. Even racism exists, although they don't show it, but it does exist, but politics, that is, the government that is in power, as I told you before, always

helps their own first and then if there is more, it gives to the others. For example, when my dad lived here and he suffered from that. That, that lack of sensitivity on the part of the mayors of the mayors who were in. Orocovis. Discrimination exists, in the workplace there is also jasa cololo or whatever, there is someone who has a factory and is the owner and employs there the person he wants, the person he wants. But for the most part, discrimination exists much more than government by color because of the problem of color.

611(Fernando)

No, but I'm not saying they discriminate like that, I'm saying that society discriminates against these people, why?

613(Wilson)

00:30:55,120 --> 00:32:27,200

No, of course. No, there are no people who don't care about these people being poor. That's how the rich are, that's how the rich are. The poor does not look at the poor, the poor looks at the rich, but the rich does not look at the poor and thank God in Puerto Rico, thank God in Puerto Rico is one of the countries with the most social classes. There are four or five types of social classes here. Now one knows who is the richest, who is the poorest. No, not that, but discrimination, yes, people do discriminate against the same people. There in an example there, the other days there is a case in court in a white family discriminating because they have a neighbor whose husband is black and the wife is white. And what does that matter to the neighbor? But he comes with them, and he has them crazy, he has them, he has them and likewise. For my part, I tell you clearly, no, for me it doesn't matter if you are black, dark, white, or blue, they are all the same. But discrimination does exist, both in the workplace. The government is where it exists the most because of the question of the colors of the political base.

643(Fernando)

00:32:27,200 --> 00:32:31,679

Do you think that is a factor why these homeless people cannot progress or a reason to demotivate them?

646(Wilson)

00:32:35,519 --> 00:33:23,360

Well, the person who wants to progress and does not want to depend on the government can progress without depending on the government. If he works and fights and knows how he is and knows how to make good economies and works, that he works properly, that he does not waste money either in vice or in gambling or in things that he does not know. Let them use it just thinking about their children. If you have children thinking about their children and their future and their future when they reach the age of 60 or older, then say okay, it was worth working, it was worth fighting.

662(Fernando)

00:33:23,360 --> 00:33:28,679

Okay, nothing grandpa, thank you very much for your opinion, for your part on this topic. Thank you for your time and nothing, see you next time.