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Oral history interview with Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano, October 5, 2024

Item Type	Oral history
Publisher	Oral History Lab @UPRM
Download date	2026-06-10 13:13:23
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/7484



ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano, October 5th, 2024

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano conducted by Giancarlo Martinez Maldonado on October 5th, 2024. 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.

Fecha de la entrevista	October 5, 2024
Lugar de la entrevista	Ocean Park Vega Baja, PR
Nombre de la persona narradora	Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano
Nombre de la persona entrevistadora	Giancarlo Martinez Maldonado
Nombre de la persona que crea o edita la transcripción	Giancarlo Martinez Maldonado
Software o aplicación de transcripción utilizada	https://turboscribe.ai
Curso y profesor (si aplica)	INGL3238, Marci E Denesiuk
Afiliación o grupo comunitario (si aplica)	N/A



Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(0:14) Hello, greetings. Good afternoon.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(0:24) Here, I introduce my grandfather, Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano, who is the person I chose for this interview. How are you?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(0:33) Yes, good afternoon, I am very well.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(0:35) Well, these are the questions from the beginning. I want to capture what your experience was like during Maria. So, I'm going to ask you some questions so you can tell me about that experience.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(0:52) Okay.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(0:54) Number one, what is your full name and how old are you?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(0:58) My name is Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano, age 61 years old.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(1:04) 61 years old, okay. And your youth, how did you grow up in Puerto Rico?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(1:11) Well, I'm from the beach area of Vega Baja, from Puerto Nuevo. I come from a humble family. In it, I learned to value work, service to others, and respect.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(1:28) Interesting. And do you have any brothers or sisters?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(1:33) Yes, we are an immediate family. We are six children, father and mother as well.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(1:44) Okay, okay. And how was your childhood during that time?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano



(1:49) Well, I had a healthy childhood where we lived, and we had the privilege that in the community, practically everyone was family, and we helped each other. During that childhood, most of what we consumed were fruits from the land harvested by our own family.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(2:16) So, you had quite a large cultivation.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(2:19) At that time, there was no Walmart, Walgreens, or those kinds of markets.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(2:28) Okay. And where do you currently live, and with whom?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(2:33) I currently live in the city of Barceloneta, the city where I have developed professionally, near the outlets in Barceloneta.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(2:43) Okay, okay. What did you do before Hurricane María, and what do you do now?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(2:52) Well, I thank God because before Maria, I had been working for about 25 years in the specialty gases market for the pharmaceutical industry. Among these specialty gases was medical oxygen, and thanks to God and Hurricane Maria, we were able to support the medical oxygen market. Today, it is one of the most sold gases here in Puerto Rico. We support over 80% of the ambulances in the northern area, as well as some private and municipal hospitals.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(3:33) Incredible. Thank God that I had the opportunity to talk to you.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(3:39) Thank you.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(3:39) My pleasure. Can you tell me a little more about your family? I know you already told me a bit, but I want you to elaborate more on how your parents were, what situations they went through in their childhood with their siblings.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano



(3:57) Well, my family, as I mentioned, is a humble family. My mom was always a housewife. My dad worked as an industrial mechanic at the pharmaceutical company Warner Lambert, which today was acquired by Pfizer.

(4:17) Within a certain framework, we had limitations, but not as significant as the generation of my parents, who had a childhood with many economic limitations. Out of the six of us, three managed to reach university degrees, and the others have their professions, doing well as electricians and service managers in other areas. As I mentioned, we were a very close-knit family; like all families, some may lose their way, but overall, I had a wonderful childhood and family. The most I learned from them was to value work, love what we do, and be of service.

(5:24) What I take most from my family, among all the principles I learned, is that—service to others.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(5:38) Excellent. And who is the most important person in your life?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(5:45) Well, the most important until a few years ago was my dear mother; she was a very special woman. My father was a very special person, but my mother was something else, from another world.

(6:03) My wife, the three daughters God blessed me with, my eldest grandson, and two younger ones are truly those who take most of my attention, time, and heart. They are the ones to whom I hope to dedicate my age.

(6:25) I refuse to grow old. I truly continue practicing sports and activities that are not appropriate for my age, but I thank God for being able to do them.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(6:41) Amen, amen. Here's a question. Could you share one of your favorite childhood memories and who was the person who most influenced you while growing up?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(6:55) One memory was when I was given a **typical** pet, a goat, which I took care of when I was in elementary school, and it would greet me when I left school so I could tend to it. I fondly remember it; it was an older goat—here we say “very old”—an adult animal, and to my surprise, it was pregnant, and one afternoon I came home to find that it had given birth. These stories will stay with me all my life; I dedicated time to that pet.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(7:43) How nice, how nice. Was there a person who influenced you in your childhood, someone you looked up to and wanted to be or be like?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano



(7:57) From then until now, the influence my father had on me, always pushing us to give our best and work hard, has stayed with me. But I'd say that the greatest influence, with all respect to my father, was my mother, who taught us to stand up for ourselves without invading others' spaces and to pursue our dreams. I believe my mother and, I must mention, the mother of a girlfriend I had for almost nine years; her mother always encouraged us to give our best and to study, to build a profession.

(8:52) I think they are the two people I remember most.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(8:58) Was there any event or lesson in your youth that shaped how you view the community and helping others?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(9:11) In my youth?

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(9:14) Yes.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(9:16) Well, during my youth, I served in the church, and I continue to this day. Since I was 12-years-old, I have served in the church, and I believe that the experiences of serving God and being part of a Christian congregation kept me focused on good things—serving and loving my neighbor. I think that is the most complete experience I have from my youth.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(9:55) Interesting.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(9:57) Thank you.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(9:59) What interests or hobbies did you have when you were young?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(10:03) Well, since I was 13 years old, I sold newspapers as a paperboy here in Puerto Rico. I was certainly very skinny, and sometimes the bicycle and the newspaper bundle weighed more than I did. But I used to get up very early in the morning, around 4:30 or 5 a.m., to deliver the newspaper.

(10:34) Later, I would help my father at a small part-time restaurant he owned. Then he would take me to school to follow my academic routine. After school, I had to return to the restaurant to clean.



(10:53) It was a task I will never forget because it was the glorious era of pop music in the 80s, and I've always been a music lover, so I did it with pleasure, listening to music.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(11:10) Okay, nice. Do you have any hobbies now?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(11:16) The hobby I treasure the most is running long distances, 5 kilometers, 10 kilometers.

(11:24) It inspires me because most of the races I participate in are for a cause, a charitable entity. For example, tomorrow, Sunday, we have the Susan G. Komen, a 5K race to honor cancer patients. It will take place in San Juan, Puerto Rico, this upcoming Sunday.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(11:55) How nice, glad to hear it. Did any of your hobbies change after Hurricane Maria?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(12:04) After Hurricane Maria, from a hobby perspective, I kept running. Before Maria, I did some swimming occasionally, and it's something I've been thinking about these past few weeks—to find a place where I can get back to this hobby I love so much, returning to swim.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(12:31) Would you like to return to it gradually?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(12:38) Yes, I'd like to make time weekly to relax my muscles and establish a balance with swimming. Besides relaxing the muscles, it's a therapy that uses almost your entire body. If I don't start by the end of the year, it should be part of my weekly routine at the beginning of next year.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(13:06) Now, I have some more specific questions about the hurricane. Could you describe what it was like when Hurricane Maria arrived? I know I was there at that moment, but I want you to elaborate a bit on the subject.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(13:22) Well, as a man of faith, I held onto the hope that nothing would happen and it took me, and most Puerto Ricans, by surprise when it hit us the way it did. Even with very secure homes, with security



windows and doors, many of us weren't as fortunate, as they broke, doors being knocked by hurricane gusts and entering homes. Those were very tense moments.

(14:04) From that, I learned that sometimes, in the middle of a storm, our faith can weaken, but I gained the greatest lesson that faith must remain strong. God protected each and everyone of us Puerto Ricans during such a devastating hurricane.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(14:29) Yes, that was a very tense moment. What was your first reaction when you realized the severity of the situation?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(14:38) Well, certainly the first priority was protecting human life, thinking about family members who weren't close by and ensuring they were doing as well or better than us. But the main reaction was to protect human life and try to ensure that properties suffered as little as possible during the hurricane.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(15:11) And how did people come together as a community immediately after the hurricane to improve things?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(15:18) That's one of the things I hold most dear in my heart, because the sharing, the willingness to serve, the empathy, helping others, even playing board games—things we hadn't done in a long time. I think most families cherished that within the need, there was space for incomparable bonding. Certainly, sometimes meals had to be prepared with what was available, even if they weren't the most nutritious, but it was what we had.

(15:57) But yes, those were wonderful times in terms of sharing, family bonding, showing love and respect among family, neighbors, friends, and employees.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(16:17) Yes, I remember we played the board game "Sorry."

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(16:21) Yes, those were unforgettable nights.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(16:24) A very long night.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(16:26) Unforgettable, certainly. Even without electricity.



Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(16:30) It wasn't needed.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(16:31) Without electricity, it wasn't necessary.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(16:35) How did you get involved in clearing debris and helping your neighbors?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(16:40) Look, fortunately, I have some tools. My father trained me to handle flora. Since I was very young, around six years old, I would visit the countryside. I was very familiar with cutting trees and clearing debris. For me, it was a privilege to have those skills to support and teach others, like Giancarlo, who also learned to use some tools.

(17:16) I think it was a major lesson for the people of Puerto Rico, for us as a family, that we had the opportunity to help each other. I remember I had to fetch drinking water using vehicles with lifts that could raise these 55-gallon containers without much effort. We would go out to get gasoline and diesel for neighbors who had electric generators.

(17:49) I also had the privilege of helping a businessman who owned a dairy farm where the roof had fallen on the animals. Since I also sell oxygen for cutting metals, I had the privilege of knowing them and supporting them in that task. They themselves also own or manage gas stations, which allowed me to obtain fuel as if I were an employee of the company.

(18:23) I never had to wait in long lines or face long waits because I had the privilege of being treated like a member of the company, so I always had fuel, even when it was scarce. Gasoline, diesel, and drinking water never ran out for families and neighbors.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(18:44) That's a blessing.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(18:45) A great blessing and privilege.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(18:49) And what motivated you to take on this role without any formal support?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(18:55) As I said from the beginning, the upbringing in my family is focused on service; we don't need to wait for someone to assign or direct us. The training we have instilled in our character as servers makes us act automatically. We immediately start serving wherever needed.



(19:22) And simply put, that fills us with joy—the satisfaction of being an instrument of help for anyone in need around us.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(19:34) Incredible, incredible. Was there any moment or challenge that stood out to you? Something that was particularly difficult or gratifying for you.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(19:47) Well, thinking back, that first sunset after the storm, I took the highway, the northern area expressway, and found it blocked with trees, shrubs, and large trees obstructing the lanes. Having a 4x4 vehicle with good clearance, I was able to get past most of them. That same afternoon, I visited some family members and helped those in need.

(20:22) I think it's one of the memories I have—seeing that I could barely use the main roads. Another memory I have is when the Manatí River in Barceloneta, where I live, overflowed, reaching about 23 feet of accumulated water in the city. Unfortunately, a few years earlier, a levee had been built to retain water. The levee is about 25 years old... 25, sorry, 25 feet tall. And it accumulated up to 22 feet of water. A bit more, and it could have flooded the entire city.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(21:09) That was probably good use of government funds, I imagine.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(21:15) Yes, it was funded with federal money. It was a project that took many years, a promise from the federal government. And it did its job. Otherwise, the city would have been devastated, as happened in Toa Baja, Levittown, and other towns where, after opening the dam, residences were submerged up to 12 feet underwater.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(21:41) And how did you feel about the government's assistance during and after the hurricane?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(21:48) Well, I must point out that the municipal government, the city officials, were fortunate that the mayor had, two months prior, purchased equipment from the United States to prepare for an event, in case one occurred. Then the hurricane came, and she had acquired the equipment two months earlier. No city in Puerto Rico had its roads cleared as effectively as Barceloneta because she had the foresight to buy the heavy equipment and machinery in case of an event like this. The event occurred, and the mayor and the city were prepared.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado



(22:45) Did you feel your community was treated fairly compared to others?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(22:50) Yes, we were privileged that the mayor of Barceloneta had purchased heavy equipment, machinery from the United States, in the spring. The equipment arrived two months before Hurricane Maria. Having those tools gave us the privilege of being the fastest city to clear the roads, support the communities, and assist the municipal officials. She had also prepared food banks.

(23:34) We believe we were privileged to recover much faster than other cities. We had the privilege of visiting the southern and central areas of Puerto Rico, which were more devastated by the hurricane due to being higher in elevation, geographically speaking. We also had the privilege of, being ready in our city, moving [to other cities] to provide services to other communities.

(24:11) The same happened with other cities that were fortunate not to suffer as much damage, and we **empathically** supported the more affected communities.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(24:28) What do you think should change in how disaster relief efforts are managed, especially for rural or underserved communities like yours?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(24:40) I would say Hurricane Maria taught us many lessons. One of them is that there were roads and bridges that hadn't been attended to for perhaps 60, 70 years. There were bridges that no longer met safety codes, and when they were destroyed by the hurricane, today we have new bridges and improved roads.

(25:11) Communication channels between the central and municipal governments have also been established. And I think we are much better prepared for future events. There's always room for improvement, but I believe we are on the right track.

(25:31) I think we can support other cities and expect more government support. must mention that the FEMA, the federal disaster relief agency, did an incredible job here in Puerto Rico. There will always be critics, but from a personal perspective, they did an incredible job.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(25:59) Did you lose any family or friends due to the hurricane?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(26:05) Well, directly, I didn't lose any family members because of the hurricane. I didn't lose any friends, but I have two or three stories that I took to heart. In the supply of medical oxygen, I encountered families who waited up to three hours outside our facility for us to arrive so they could get medical oxygen for their bedridden family member.



(26:38) I don't have knowledge of anyone who passed away, but we were a key part of ensuring that those bedridden individuals with different health conditions could receive medical oxygen on time and continue living. However, I do know, I believe it was the mayor of San Germán, whose father passed away because there was no electricity, and the machine providing him with medical oxygen stopped working. And there are other similar cases throughout Puerto Rico.

(27:13) On my end, I did not experience the loss of a family member, friend, or acquaintance due to the hurricane.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(27:25) What was your favorite and least favorite part of the hurricane? Something that made you grow as a person and something you disliked about the hurricane.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(27:41) Well, certainly the thing I disliked the most, and hope we never have to experience again, is a hurricane of that magnitude. Experts say this happens every 100 years. I have my doubts because another hurricane just occurred a week or so ago. Not here in the Caribbean, but in the southern part of the United States, causing incredible devastation. But the most unpleasant experience was the helplessness—having so much technology and not being able to do more during the storm. What I treasure the most is the bonding and connection that occurred between families, neighbors, and friends. Certainly, the essence of the Puerto Rican people is to lend a helping hand. Those were very difficult times, lasting for months. Some areas took up to a year, but in my case, we were without electricity for about three and a half to four months.

(29:01) We were without drinking water for about six weeks. But amidst all these limitations, that time spent together, talking, and helping each other will never be forgotten. I believe those Puerto Ricans who went through this experience can say there is a before and after Hurricane Maria.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(29:32) Approximately how many sales did you make after Hurricane Maria hit?

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(29:39) Well, to complement the previous question about what I enjoyed about the hurricane, from a business perspective, we acquired new clients and built new commercial and personal relationships to the point that the sale of medical oxygen, which was maybe our fifth, sixth, or seventh top product, is now one of the top one or two in sales today. It is a privilege for us. This unforgettable privilege also allowed us, during the country's lockdown, to freely go out every day during the pandemic without any government restrictions because we had to supply medical oxygen to hospitals and ambulance companies. This privilege of selling medical oxygen gave us the opportunity to go out and work every day, help, and support those in need.



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(30:47) I cannot say I spent a single day confined to my home due to pandemic restrictions, thanks to that valuable life-saving product, medical oxygen, which allowed us to go out and work every day, and give a helping hand, supporting to those who are in need.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(31:07) That's great, great, great. Well, thank you so much for this interview; I appreciate it very much.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(31:15) It's a privilege for me to share our story. Thank you very much.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(31:24) Thank you for listening to the interview with Luis Roberto Duarte, my grandfather. Thank you very much, and see you next time.

Luis Roberto Duarte Feliciano

(31:32) Blessings.

Giancarlo A Martinez Maldonado

(31:32) Blessings.