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Oral history interview with Carlos Rodríguez García, March 11, 2022

Item Type	Oral history
Publisher	Oral History Lab @UPRM
Download date	2026-03-09 19:09:28
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/2970

ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Carlos Rodríguez García

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Carlos Rodríguez García conducted by Claudia on March 11, 2022. This interview is part of course work done by students at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

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

Interview Transcript:

Interviewer: Claudia (student)

Interviewee: Carlos Rodríguez García (lawyer)

Interview Setting: House of Carlos Rodríguez conducted at 2:00 P.M. on March 11, 2022.

(Start of Interview)

(0:00-0:33) Interviewer: Hello, my name is Claudia. I belong to the oral history/creative writing English course and today I will be interviewing you for this class. I want to thank Carlos Rodríguez that is joining me today for this interview. I will be asking some questions about hurricane George and some justice/social issues you personally had to deal during this natural disaster. To start, I will be making some questions about you. What is your occupation and what are some things you enjoy doing?

(0:35-1:09) Interviewee: Hi, good afternoon Claudia, my name is Carlos Rodriguez. I have been a lawyer for the last 34 years. I enjoy practicing my profession because being a lawyer gives me the opportunity to help another person. I also enjoy a lot being with my family, going out to dinner, watching sports, and playing some tennis.

(1:10-1:13) Interviewer: For how long have you been a lawyer?

(1:13-1:20) Interviewee: Actually, this year 2022, I reached 34 years of being a lawyer and practicing it.

(1:21-1:28) Interviewer: I understand you lived the experience of Hurricane Georges, how old were you when this happened?

(1:29-1:45) Interviewee: Yes Claudia, it was the kind of experience that you never forget. When hurricane Georges happened in 1998, I was only 35 years old. My oldest son, Carlitos, was only 9-10 months old.

(1:47-1:49) Interviewer: Can you talk to us about this experience?

(1:50-6:05) Interviewee: Yes, during hurricane Georges we had recently moved to a new house in Humacao, Puerto Rico. It was a very nice neighborhood. We established a good relationship with the neighbors. I can remember about a week before the hurricane, all the weather channels were not sure if the hurricane would hit or not the island. There was a lot of confusion and different weather forecast. The people were very confused about which final route the hurricane Georges would take. It was only two or three days before Georges that all the people started to take preventive measures to reduce the possible damages the hurricane could produce in the community. About ten years before hurricane Georges, another hurricane, Hugo, hit the island but the truth is that we were not sure about how much destruction the hurricane can or would produce in the island or in our area. I remember that before the hurricane everyone helped each other. We visited our neighbor's house to check if everybody was safe, if anyone needed help with the latter or any hammer. We helped each other when anyone needed wood panels in the windows or doors to secure our properties; also, we put tapes in the crystal window and door areas. We also talked a lot about what would happen that night. At dawn, around 7pm, it started raining. After 10pm, the wind increased the speed. The sound was very powerful and loud. In a matter of minutes or so, we could start to feel a lot of pressure in the air inside the house. The pressure was so big that it was very difficult to open a simple door. When the rain started, the rain and wind penetrated the doors and between the windows. For this reason, my wife and I decide to close everything and go to sleep. Not too much after that, about onehoue or maybe two hours, we heard a big sound from the room of our son. When we could open the door of his room, which was very hard because of the pressure of the wind, we saw that a window inside the room had collapsed. A lot of rain was coming inside our son's room. My wife and I decided to take the baby in our arms and moved to a small room, which was the bathroom. We stayed inside the bath until the end of the storm. We stayed inside that small bathroom for about 4 hours. The next day, very early in the morning, the hurricane had passed. We could see how much destruction and damage it caused in this East side of the island. Many houses lost their roof, windows, and doors. Also, many people lost everything like furniture, electrical appliances, everything because of the wind and the rain.

(6:08-6:12) Interviewer: Can you describe how your family felt in this situation?

(6:19-7:12) Interviewee: Wow, what can I say... We felt scared, with a lot of pressure and lots of concern because we were scared of what would happen in the future and how much it would last (shortage of electrical energy, water and food). We didn't have energy to turn on the TV or the radio and be conscious of what was happening in the rest of the island.

(7:14-7:20) Interviewer: Did your family suffer any food shortage? Did you hear or see people suffering this?

(7:21-9:22) Interviewee: I get to give thanks to God because my wife and my family, we didn't suffer shortage of food; we suffered other necessities but not for food. About two or three days after the hurricane many supermarkets opened, and we could buy enough groceries to remain in the house for about two weeks. Also, my wife's parents lived very close to us, we all cooperated making a kind of cooperative to exchanged articles depending on the needs of each person. Thankfully, we didn't have any shortage of food. Regarding the other question, of course we saw other families with bigger necessities than us. We lived in a rural area, there was also many houses made of wood. Those people, many of them, lost their house, furniture, beds basically almost everything. Thanks to God, the community moved to help these people very quick.

(9:23- 9:30) Interviewer: Did the government respond well in this situation? What are some things they did to help the people that needed help?

(9:31-12:10) Interviewee: Well, in general I can say that yes. The government responded properly. At this moment, I can't say accurately who was the governor at that time, I think it was Pedro Roselló. During the next days, the governor and all the directors of many of the most important Puerto Rican state agencies started giving assistance to the most affected people. The governor also activated the National Guard. I can't forget how important the participation of the private sectors like the Church and non-profit corporations was. The private sectors gave a powerful response to the people of Humacao. In Humacao, where we lived, the Catholic Church and also the nice people of the Pentecostal Church gave food and opened free dining places, they donated clothes and collected many things to help those people in needs. We can't also forget the participation of the chefs, many private chefs opened public dining centers to give food for many people around different locations in Humacao. Also, the service from the people of the school canteen that belongs to the department of education. They gave takeout food and canned food. The participation of everyone was very important. They helped to give food for those in need.

(12:12-12:15) Interviewer: Did many people lost their home?

(9:16-13:47) Interviewee: Yes Claudia. From the place that we lived, we could see the people that lived in the hills around Humacao. We could watch all the devastation in the mountain hills because of the effect of the rain and the wind. Those people needed to stay in public refugees/ shelters. People from the municipalities and local agencies opened those shelters in many schools that belonged to the department of education. They received health services, food, clothes, psychiatric and psychological support they needed to deal with the new reality, which was that they probably had to begging again, from 0. Many people that lost their home, had to move from their houses to the shelters around the area.

(13:50-13:54) Interviewer: How did the government help these people that lost their home?

(13:55-15:45) Interviewee: It was very important the participation of the governmental sector, many of the agencies like social services, family administration, also including our judicial system, moved in the same direction to help people. It was also very important the participation of the Puerto Rican National Guard that moved to clean the rivers, roads, and the trees, they

helped in preparing the island to move forward from this catastrophic event. Our justice system moved all the appointments and hearings that were already on schedule to protect the rights of the citizens. Me, as a lawyer, was unable to go to the court for about four months until the courts from the area from Humacao to Caguas was in condition to serve the service that the people deserve.

(15:46- 15:50) Interviewer: How much did it pass until you could start working again?

(15:51- 17:18) Interviewee: About two months after the Hurricane, we moved to my private law office that was located in Caguas, as I said before, I lived in Humacao, but my private law office is located in Caguas. Two months after that, I obtained a small power generator and moved it to my office. We had to clean all the area, remove the mud, dust, and all the water that penetrated the office. Using the small power generator, we couldn't start working with the computers, but we could do inside office work. I think that about three to four months passed before the court started appointing hearings again. I think it also took about four months for the energy to reestablish in this side of the island, the East side of the island).

(17:19 17:20)- Interviewer: Did your house suffer many damages?

(17:21- 19:05) Interviewee: My house was well built; it was made of concrete and had a well solid structure, but we lost two windows. One, as I said before, in the room of my small boy and another one located in the kitchen. Thanks to God, I didn't suffer a lot of damages in my house. One thing I will never forget is when I went to the backyard and one of my neighbors had an aluminum/metal little house that is used to storage things. I don't know how this small house ended up in my backyard. It jumped the fence and was now located in my house. When me and my neighbor, Carmelo, tried to move the storage house to the original place, I suffered a cut in my hand with the metal. It was nothing too serious, but I remember I cut my house but thanks to God my house didn't suffer many damages in this event; it was a solid one.

(19:06 -19:11) Interviewer: How long did it take for the workers to clear up the road?

(19:12-23:15) Interviewee: Our area/neighbor was cleaned in first instance by us, the neighbors. After a couple of days, we started seeing people from the Municipality of Humacao with big machineries cleaning the area. I also remember seeing pictures of boats, as you should know, Humacao has coast and beaches around, so we saw boats that ended up inside the roads. These were pushed by the waves and even ended up in the backyard of some houses close to the area of Humacao beach. It is very difficult to forget these pictures in my mind. After that, I would say two or three weeks later, the workers of the National Guard started using big machinery to clear up the main roads. Specially, road number 30 in Humacao that was the main road that connected Humacao to other municipalities around the area. They also used heavy equipment to cut the trees that was blocking the roads, not only the principal ones but also the small ones around and inside the city. When the street was clean, we decided to take a small trip to the beach area and to the small town of Humacao and see the struggles this powerful Hurricane produce in that area. I say this area because other parts of the island didn't suffer from this hurricane; this hurricane was

concentrated in the East side of the island. I remember that I had friends and family that lived in Arecibo, Aguadilla, Cabo Rojo and nothing happened in those cities. As soon as we could have the opportunity, we traveled to Ponce to buy ice and other countries far from Humacao because as I said before, they didn't suffer the struggle of hurricane Georges. It was different from hurricane María because María covered the whole island and hurricane Georges covered only the East side of the island. I think that this was the reason because the recovery on this side of the island didn't take too long as it took in hurricane María. Thankfully, we didn't suffer the shortage of gas and food that we suffered when María hit the island in 2017.

(23:18-23:25) Interviewer: Did you suffer any emergency in which you needed medical or other type of help?

(23:26- 24:25) Interviewee: No Claudia, not at all, neither me or my close related family but I was informed that many people that were in the shelter and people that was suffering physical or mental limitations were having a very difficult moment without the advantage of power generator or enough food but I can say that we were lucky with the hurricane because we didn't have to pass some of the limitations that others had to face.

(24:27-24:36) Interviewer: Did the government supply you with food and drinks? How long did it take the government to do this if they did so?

(24:37- 26:11) Interviewee: Our most limited resource during that time was the necessity of ice because as I said before, I was prepared for staying home for two weeks or maybe three. It was only me, my wife, and my oldest son Carlitos in 1998 when hurricane Georges passed so thankfully, I didn't need any help with food and stuff like that. I remember that a neighbor that worked in a school canteen, every afternoon he came to the neighborhood and gave everyone canned food, juice, and things like that. People from the civil defense went house by house giving bags of ice. As I said before, we were very lucky and didn't have to suffer the necessities that other people had to deal with.

(26:12-26:19) Interviewer: Was there anyone close to you who died because the government didn't offer enough resources?

(26:20- 27:29) Interviewee: Thanks to God no, during this hurricane not many people died. People that died was because they were trying to clean branches in the roof that were too close to the power energy lines and accidentally, they touched those lines, and the area was wet, so they died by electric shock. Also, people fell from the roof and stuff like that, but I don't remember more than three or four people. I want to clear that one person is too much but if we compare to other events in Puerto Rico like the mud slide in Mameyes, or hurricane María, but Hurricane George thanks to God didn't took many lives.

(27:31-27:36) Interviewer: As a lawyer, how did you help people after this natural disaster?

(27:37-31:33) Interviewee: Before answering that question, I prefer to say how I helped other

people as a citizen. I had a small electric power generator, so I lend it to many of my neighbors. In that time, it was different than now. Now, everybody or lots of people have power generator but that was not the same reality as in hurricane George. I lend tools that I had because I was kind of a handy man and I enjoyed making lots of things in my house, so I had many tools that I lend to my neighbors. Going back to your question, as a lawyer, I helped many people because many came to my office. My office is on the city of Caguas but during this time, I also moved my office to my house in Humacao in the afternoon and night hours. Many of my neighbors needed things like affidavit to make statements because the federal and local agencies needed to fulfill those documents that also needed to be checked by a public notary. Working as a public notary I gave service to many people that needed to notarize those documents. I also had to deal with the people who was living under the program eight of the housing department. The plan eight helps people to lease apartments and pay it. Many people suffered from charges because they abandoned their property, something that is prohibited by this program. I went to about four to five hearings in front of the housing department administrative law judge and represented those people in the trials. The department understood the necessity of those people and conceded the decision and benefit that they had the right to live under those apartments and under the benefit of program eight. Making my job of a public notary, I think I had the opportunity to help people during the time that hurricane Georges hit the island.

(31:35-31:41) Interviewer: What would you say was the scariest part on your experience throughout the hurricane?

(31:42-33:46) Interviewee: Well Claudia, I can say I will never forget the sound of the wind throughout the hurricane, it sounded like something awful, like something bad was about to happen. The scariest part was when I couldn't open the door of my baby's room and go inside because of the wind. It was very hard to open the door because the wind made it hard to go in. When we finally entered the room and saw that broken window close to my baby's bed it was very scary because I thought the window had hit or made any damage to my small boy that was only nine to ten months old. We checked my son and thanks to God nothing bad had happened to him. After checking him and making sure he didn't get hurt I gave the baby to my wife, and we went running to the bathroom. We stayed in that bathroom for about four hours listening and hearing the wind, the branches hitting windows, all these sounds I think one never forgets them, they remain in your mind forever.

(33:48-33:53) Interviewer: Based on your experience, what advice would you give to younger people?

(33:57- 38:00) Interviewee: Young people have many advantages and benefits that we didn't have back in time. For example, the access to social media. Young people have a bigger opportunity to see weather channels. Also, now that social media is very advanced, you can contact family from outside of Puerto Rico and have more valid information of what is going on and how to get prepared. Another advice I can give you is to be ready with more anticipated time than us back at hurricane Georges time. For example, to prepare before the event happens. Back in those days, we thought that having a reserve of food and water for two weeks was enough, but

this is not true. I encourage younger people to prepare with more time in advantage and to be more focused on what the news says. Another advantage younger people have is the development of solar energy. Today, solar energy is a powerful tool that you have so now people don't have to depend only on gas, fuel, and diesel. There's no need to storage these in your house if you have a solar system. I didn't mention before that some people died trying to refuel the power generator while the power generator is on. This is very dangerous because it can flame up, not only the machine but also yourself. In conclusion, I would advise to take advantage of your access to social media, technology, solar power energy supplies and all the opportunities you have now.

(38:03-38:14) Interviewer: Now that you have talked about the bad things that happened throughout this time, what would you say was something positive you obtained from this situation?

(38:24-41:00) Interviewee: The most amazing and good things we learned was ho a catastrophe can unite a neighborhood. I had the opportunity to know people that I never knew before. Many of us went outside and made barbecue. Someone put the rice, another one the beans, the other one the sausage and so on... Another good experience I will never forget is how the families reencountered, the cousins we don't see so often, the brothers, the grandparents, etc... We all encountered on our mother's house and shared stories, songs, readings, music, places, and memories. Also, we played the games we used to play when we were younger. We shared food, we cooked together, this was something amazing. From this we learned that the bad things bring up good ones.

(41:03-41:11) Interviewer: You also talked about how the government react in this situation, is there something you think the government could have done better?

(41:13-43:29) Interviewee: Maybe not better, but in the way they delivered the situation. Let me explain that, just one day before the hurricane hit the island, we saw many important political figures in the island in TV or radio stations talking about what they were going to do. In the TV they were making video conference wearing these blue jackets from the civil defense and from FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and trying to obtain political advantage during this tragedy. They were the first one in the photo shootings, they were the first one in the TV conference. They even gave every hour or half an hour reports about nothing because in half an hour, nothing happens in this type of event. Seeing those people trying to obtain political advantage from a tragic situation was something that I didn't agree with. They are supposed to be there to serve and help the community, not to obtain political advantage. They should never use these tragic events as a political goal, this is not good.

(43:30-43:38) Interviewer: How did you feel when you walked out of your house for the first time when the hurricane had left the island?

(43:42-47:08) Interviewee: It was something strange because the air looked so clean, everything smelled so fresh after the hurricane. When you open your eyes and see the devastation, the

damage this hurricane caused to other people. First you give thanks to God because you were not in bad condition, but it was a strange sensation. First, the silence, there was no sound around you. The fresh wind and the humidity in the air was a strange sensation. Another thing is that it makes you aware about how many people in Puerto Rico lives under the poverty. Poverty is something everybody talks about but sometimes it looks strange to you, what other people call invisibility of the poverty, but that kind of event makes it clear that poverty does exist in Puerto Rico and that many people live under the poverty. Many houses were not prepared for this type of event like houses made of wood. Government had to took action to help these people, not before the event but after the event and in that way the possibilities of tragedies were diminished because if you live in safe place, the possibilities of suffering major illness and traumas are less. I remember how clear everything looked. I was more conscious that many people live under fragile and poverty conditions.

(47:09-47:19) Interviewer: Do you think Hurricane George helped you feel more prepared for the hit of Hurricane Maria in 2017?

(47:21-50:29) Interviewee: Yes, absolutely, I think Hurricane George was a lesson for everybody and we must learn from these situations to be better prepared for new catastrophic events. For hurricane Maria, I was much better prepared. I had a big storage of fuel in my house, in this occasion I had the help of my sons Carlitos and [redacted]. We prepared the doors, moved the furniture, protect the cars and we made a better reserve of food, water, and rice. We certainly were better prepared. Of course, I have to say that nobody was 100% prepared for hurricane level 4 like María, but in terms of the safety of the house, reserve of food, water, food, a better and more efficient power generator than in time of hurricane Georges, absolutely we were more prepared. Another situation is that now I could count with the help of my wife and my two children. It was not the same as in hurricane Georges when I had only one son which was a baby with nine months. With two older kids, my oldest son went to the gas station and my daughter helped moving the furniture and cleaning the house. When hurricane María passed, we realize that hurricane Georges was a lesson to us so the answer is yes, hurricane George helped us a lot to be prepared for new catastrophic events.

(50:30-50:39) Interviewer: We talked about how the government helped in this situation, now I would like to know how some private sectors helped throughout the event

(50:41-54:35) Interviewee: I have to say that the help, the participation of the private sectors was fundamental throughout hurricane Georges. The first movement we saw in the community was the help of the Church giving food, helping sick people, moving resources like spiritual support and psychological support to the communities. Maybe the government had good intentions but is too hard to move all the agencies of the city to help people while dealing also with the trouble and violence of the island. It was easier for the private sector to help because they were closer to the citizens. As I said before, an example is the Church barrowing its space to give shelter to people in need. You also see nonprofit corporation like dining rooms giving food for those who were in need and giving a hand to the people that were left without a home. The first help we saw was not the governmental one, it was the private sectors that moved quickly

and in a more efficient way than the governmental agencies. We can also talk about the important role that took the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. Not only in Humacao but throughout the whole island they helped with medical supplies and resources. In conclusion, the private sector was the key for a better and faster process in returning to the normality.

(54:38-54:47) Interviewer: Last of all, how do you feel this natural disaster, called hurricane George, impacted you personally throughout your life?

(54:49-57:19) Interviewee: Throughout my life, I have learned that nothing occurs by accident and that everything has a purpose in life. Bad experiences give you the opportunity to learn and to be a better person. Looking forward, I can say that it was only a negative experience because not only me, but everybody learns from these kinds of events, sometimes in a painful way but everyone learns at last. I learned that life is fragile, and it can change in a minute. Events can occur that can change your life, but you must appreciate every moment and live your life in a way that you learn and enjoy every moment. One realizes that everything occurs with a purpose so hurricane Georges taught me that everything can change from one day to another. That forces me to be a better person and to be prepare for any incident that can occur with or without previous knowledge. This was the most important lesson hurricane George taught me in my life.

(57:20-57:39) Interviewer: Thank you so much for sharing this story with us, I'm very grateful to hear your story about hurricane George. I learned many lessons hearing about your experience. It also made me remember about mine through hurricane Maria. Last question is do you give me permission to share this story?

(57:40-59:35) Interviewee: Yes, I do. I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity for younger people to hear my experience and learn something about my experience. I encourage you and the listener to be brave and perseverate. Don't be afraid of this natural disaster but be prepared for these events. If you are well prepared, you will be able to succeed.

(59:40-60:00) Interviewer: Thank you Carlos for giving me this opportunity.