

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

LUZ RODRIGUEZ

Interviewed by

JOYCE FOLLET

June 16 - 17, 2006

Northampton, Massachusetts

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Narrator

Luz Marina Rodriguez was born in New York City on March 7, 1956, and grew up on the Lower East Side. She was the eldest of three children of Elsa Rodriguez Vazquez and Luis Rodriguez Nieto, Sr., who had both recently migrated from Puerto Rico as part of Operation Bootstrap. Her father held a variety of jobs, including electronics repair and night security work, while her mother worked as an Avon Lady.

After graduating from Seward Park High School in 1974, Rodriguez spent two years immersed in social and cultural activities in her Puerto Rican neighborhood, which became known as Loisaida. She was deeply involved in The Real Great Society, a gang outreach and community empowerment organization created in 1964 to engage youth in addressing local needs, especially sweat equity projects to create affordable housing. She was also an active participant in CHARAS/El Bohio, a cultural center where she taught Puerto Rican folkloric dance.

After studying dance at Pratt Institute, Rodriguez graduated from NYU as a dance therapy major in 1982. College research into the sterilization and birth control experimentation on Puerto Rican women planted the seed of later reproductive rights activism.

Rodriguez defines herself as a servant-leader. She has continued to combine grassroots social justice work with administrative leadership in non-profit organizations, including Henry Street Settlement, Lower East Side Family Resource Center, Dominican Women's Development Center, and Casa Atabex. In 1996 she became Executive Director of the Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights and played a critical role in the formation of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective. A specialist in organizational development and non-profit sustainability, Rodriguez currently serves as bilingual training coordinator at the New York City headquarters of the Foundation Center.

Rodriguez was awarded a Windcall Residency in 1994 for her advocacy work. She is a published poet as well as a playwright and an aspiring sculptor. She remains active in SisterSong. She has two sons, a step-son, a foster daughter, a kinship foster child, and four grandchildren.

The Luz Rodriguez Papers are at the Sophia Smith Collection.

Interviewer

Joyce Follet (b.1945) is a public historian, educator, and producer of historical documentary. She earned a Ph.D. in Women's History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and serves as Coordinator of Collection Development at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Abstract

Rodriguez describes childhood and adolescence on the Lower East Side. Her story underscores the centrality of cultural programs to community organizing in the late 1960s and the difficulty of integrating artistic work and political conviction in later years. Rodriguez describes the organizational challenges and personal costs involved in creating and sustaining small social justice organizations. The interview includes a detailed account of the formation of SisterSong.

Restrictions: none

Format: Recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Six 63-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Kurka. Audied for accuracy by Cara Sharpes. Edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Reviewed, edited and approved by Luz Rodriguez and Joyce Follet.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Rodriguez, Luz. Interview by Joyce Follet. Video recording, June 16 and 17, 2006. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Luz Rodriguez interview by Joyce Follet, video recording, June 16, 2006, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Rodriguez, Luz. Interview by Joyce Follet. Transcript of video recording, June 16 and 17, 2006. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Luz Rodriguez, interview by Joyce Follet, transcript of video recording, June 16, 2006, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
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Transcript of interview conducted June 16-17, 2006, with:

LUZ RODRIGUEZ
at: Smith College
by: JOYCE FOLLET

FOLLET: Where would you start if you wanted to reflect on your life?

6:40

RODRIGUEZ: My goodness.

FOLLET: I know, that's a big one.

RODRIGUEZ: I thought you would take the lead on that one. (laughs)

FOLLET: OK, do you want me to?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, yes.

FOLLET: All right. So let's head towards the beginning then. Your childhood.

RODRIGUEZ: My childhood.

FOLLET: Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: You ever heard of the play called *Prisoner of Second Avenue*?

FOLLET: No, tell me.

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I remember not seeing the play — because I was a little girl, but I lived on Second Avenue and I thought that that was the hottest thing, that there was this off-Broadway show called the *Prisoner of Second Avenue*. I grew up on Second Avenue and Ninth Street but actually, my grandparents were on St. Mark's Place, on Eighth Street. My parents were on Ninth Street between Second and Third Avenue in Manhattan. And my grandparents, where I mostly stayed, were on St. Mark's Place between Second and Third. That was like the vortex of what they call now the East Village. We were on the Lower East Side back then. Basically, Second Avenue was indeed the dividing line between the Village and the Lower East Side. I went to school on the Lower East Side — First Avenue, Avenue A. But my grandparents, where I used to go after school, were right smack in the middle of where everything was

happening, from the hippies to the yippies to the — you know, all the beatniks had come before the hippies, and I remember starting to see people barefoot you know, with bells on their toes. Because I just used to hang on the stoop outside my grandparents' house. I was a child of Second Avenue, where I was exposed to all of the social changes that were occurring that usually, I would venture to say always started on Eighth Street and St. Mark's Place. That's where the Electric Circus was. If the social patterns were shifting from the beatniks to the hippies or to the yippies, and to the yuppies, it all kind of started in St. Mark's Place. And I would watch it throughout my childhood.

Going to school — I went to school on the Lower East Side. So I went to elementary school on First Avenue, PS 122, and then I went to Junior High School 60 which, the building seemed almost like prison. It was like one of those old, old, institutional, huge buildings and I felt it was very prison-like. With a courtyard even, you know. And you got to hang out at lunchtime in the courtyard. And then I went to Seward Park, which was further east.

FOLLET: This was high school?

RODRIGUEZ: Seward Park High School. I think Walter Matthau went to Seward Park High School. That was one of the frames that you saw in the hallway. (laughs) There was a whole other social dynamic going on, on the other side of Second Avenue, and that was the energy that I was most attracted to — which confounded my parents, because I think that they were very strategic about keeping us on the Village side. But all I ever wanted to do was be on the Lower East Side, because that's where I found community. As a child, I benefited from a whole array of grassroots organizations that were being funded by the Real Great Society, whatever that meant. [The Real Great Society was a gang outreach and community empowerment program and a forerunner to CHARAS.] As a child and a young teenager, I knew that this was because of the Real Great Society, whatever that was. There was a poetry workshop. There was a dance theater. There was the Nuyorican Poets Café, the Teatro Ambulante. I was surrounded by tremendous, tremendous writers and poets and dancers, folkloric dancers, painters, musicians, all doing social justice work.

11:38

FOLLET: Through their art?

RODRIGUEZ: Through their art, and part of their social justice work was to get little kids like me that were growing into teenagers into the arts and off the streets. Many of them were former gang members themselves, the founders of CHARAS/El Bohio and Teatro Ambulante. I was very attracted to the arts and just soaked it all up. I was a poet. I was a playwright. I was a *bomba y plena* dancer and really saw it as community service, because we would perform in street festivals. And actually many of these older guys that were my mentors: Chino Garcia,

Armando Perez, Bimbo Rivas, they were all exposed to Buckminster Fuller, who had come down and talked to them and was really instrumental in turning their lives around from using that organizational structure they had as gang members and transforming it to community service. I benefited from all of that. So for me, the term Bucky Fuller was old hat, even though I didn't know who he was, but I knew how to build a geodesic dome. My so-called gang member mentors were doing the math formulas to do pipe domes and educate the community about alternative forms of living and, you know, sustainability and ecology, smack in the ghetto of the Lower East Side. (laughs)

We were real groundbreakers and I grew up through that. Those are the ranks that I grew up through and so social justice was just like breathing. It was just something that you did. If you saw wrong, you spoke on it. If you were living and breathing and had energy and had a meal and a roof over your head, then you were privileged and had the responsibility to speak for those that were not. Since they all happened to be artists, it all was through the arts. I remember being part of a team that would build the pipe geodesic dome. The guys would bring in a stage, put it under it and then we would put a parachute over it –

FOLLET: There's a geodesic dome and there's a stage over the –

RODRIGUEZ: – that would cover it. It's a geodesic dome. No, and then there will be an entrance and it was all hexagons, right, made of pipes. So it's all see-through and then we would build a stage inside, like half of it. And then someone would come and bring a huge parachute, like a real parachute, and drape it over the dome up on top so it would cover the top. Then, Teatro Ambulante, the bomba dancers and the poets and everyone would perform on the stage, inside the dome. And all the kids and the seniors and the community people would be sitting inside and surrounding outside. It was a Lower East Side amphitheater and people would like be climbing on it. The kids would climb on it so they could get a better view. And that was one of my summer jobs.

FOLLET: How old were you when this was happening?

15:40

RODRIGUEZ: I was around 15. Carolyn Curran, who was also a mentor, who was part of Seven Loaves, that was another organization that was part of that whole blossoming of community organization. Seven Loaves focused on acquiring abandoned buildings and organizing cooperative ownership of community members, and getting government loans to renovate. It was the beginning of sweat equity. So, one of my first summer youth employment jobs was — because all these organizations were work sites for the summer youth employment programs — so, one of my first summer youth employment jobs was demolition of an old, burnt-out building.

That was during the time that the Bronx was burning. You know how people have this image that the Bronx was just, like, burning all the

time. It was happening on the Lower East Side too, and so there were a lot of burnt-out buildings and abandoned lots. I grew up around a whole movement people who were — if you don't have anything better to do, then come help us take these tires out, come help clean this lot, because it's going to be a garden. And that's why we have gardens, all these hidden pocket gardens in Lower Manhattan.

I did demolition and earned my way, through sweat equity, to get my own apartment in the first sweat equity building, 519 East Eleventh Street. By the time I was 18, I was earning sweat equity and learning how to then put up sheetrock, spackle. It was the first building that got a windmill in New York. MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] got involved in the project and sent some students to build solar energy panels and a windmill. So, my first apartment was in, like, a green building that we'd built from scratch. (laughs)

I'm not your typical Puerto Rican New York kid as the stereotype would have it. Even when I was in school, I was not a typical kid. They weren't reaching everybody in terms of the kids on the block. They reached me and some friends that are still lifetime friends that I know from high school because we got involved with CHARAS or the Nuyorican Poets Café, you know, that whole community movement. But then there were others that did not get involved and saw me as different. I didn't fit into any of the cliques in junior high school and high school, and usually the cliques were around racial boundaries.

FOLLET: Really?

19:28

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. There was the black girls' clique, the Puerto Rican girls' clique and the white girls, and everybody kind of stuck together. We weren't gangs but you needed to be part of a clique for protection.

FOLLET: And would those cliques — were they determined by neighborhood, by where you lived, by school, by —

RODRIGUEZ: Like I said, from my recollection, most of them were determined by race. There might have been more than one clique in that racial subsection. But you would see it in the courtyard immediately, how there would be like a prison. Like in the movies, you see the prison and the courtyard, and the black guys kind of congregate and the white guys congregate, and you have to be part of a clique. I did not fit in the Puerto Rican girls' clique. I looked white so I was suspect. I didn't have an accent and I was doing really good in school, getting good grades. That was suspect. (laughs)

The black girls, again, thought I was white and if I wasn't being accepted in the Puerto Rican girls' clique, the black girls weren't going to have it. The white girls knew I wasn't white. They had no problem knowing I wasn't white. (laughs) That's been the story of my life, where if I get told, Oh you look white, or I wasn't quite sure what race you were, it's usually a Puerto Rican. (laughs)

FOLLET: Who will say that?

RODRIGUEZ: Who will say that because white people have no problem knowing I'm not white. (laughs) I think it's hilarious. I didn't think it was hilarious then, though. In puberty, as a young woman, it really isolated me. I had my little community when I was outside of school, where I could go and do the arts. And so my survival, first of all, is that I had my own little clique, which was two black girls, a Puerto Rican and a white girl. We were like the Mod Squad [1970s TV show]. So there were like two black girls and even though they would be accepted in the black girls' clique, did not feel that that was the extent of their universe. I had a Puerto Rican really close friend, and a white girl who was really cool with us, and us with her. We would have lunch sometimes together or do stuff together. I was like a pioneer in interracial relationships way back. (laughs) We all had our first cigarette together, you know, we did the school kind of rites of passage together, and the arts.

FOLLET: You did the arts together? Was that what brought you together, the four of you?

RODRIGUEZ: I don't even remember. Maybe it will come to me.

FOLLET: And was this like elementary, junior high?

RODRIGUEZ: Junior high. But even from elementary, I was always involved in whatever plays were going on, any theater action going on. I did every role in the theater from junior high school through high school years. I would be actor, I would be stage manager. I would work with whoever the drama teacher was very closely — also making me suspect to the kids, because I was considered like teacher's pet, you know, because I would be studying the scripts and highlighting the characters for people. I was really drawn to the arts and really learned everything about the theater, from how to make your own 8 x 10 and what a résumé should look like to lighting a play, set design, the readings of a script before you begin rehearsal, I mean, everything about the theater, just by being involved in the theater in school.

I had a wonderful drama teacher, Mrs. Just, who would take us to Broadway shows for us to then put together the productions. I remember that the programs had to say a different name, like if it was *Man of La Mancha*, we had to put *Don Quixote* or something, for some copyright thing. We would go see *Sound of Music* and then go do it. We would go see *Man of La Mancha*. And I got to see many of the classics on Broadway.

FOLLET: You mentioned school as one of your important environments and neighborhood, and your grandparents. What role was family playing in your options or aspirations, your immediate family?

RODRIGUEZ: I didn't fit in there, either. I mean, seriously. I must have really gravitated to community service and community organizing that was going on out of a sense like people get involved in gangs and cliques, you know, out of this hunger to be part of a family and a community or a feeling of needing to be part of something where you fit.

FOLLET: And you didn't fit in your –

25:45

RODRIGUEZ: I didn't fit. I didn't even feel that I looked like them. I didn't fit. My parents migrated, both from Puerto Rico in the '50s, met in New York — and that's a funny story, how they met — had me and went on with the business of surviving, especially my father. He was just hardly ever there anyway because he was just so busy trying to survive economically. My mom and I were just really different characters — although now, it makes sense. I mean, she was like a community leader. She was the Avon Lady that always gave advice and everybody came to. So I always felt that she was just so full of herself and thought she knew everything. But in retrospect, my mom was a community leader that women went to for everything. She knew more English — you know, she had dominated English better than the rest. Even then there was an influx of South American immigrants. I mean, it's a whole big thing now, but always there's been South American immigrants. I remember my mom having a very international array of female friends who knew a little less Spanish than she did or not at all, and she was the one that women would come to, to navigate the system basically.

FOLLET: Really?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, yes. So we weren't that unlike at all. It's just that as a kid, I didn't appreciate that. I had to package the Avon [products], which made me nauseous with all the perfumes. To this day, I can't wear perfume because of Avon. My cousins and my family, I just felt that I didn't fit for whatever reason and they weren't going to understand this whole community organizing — you know, the involvement that was so important to me, the theater. They were just not –

FOLLET: Did they curtail you in any way from your interests?

RODRIGUEZ: No, they didn't. Again, in retrospect, I always felt like my father was never there or he was very unaffectionate. However, he was an aspiring photographer and he again, in retrospect, I didn't appreciate as a child, how he had taken pictures of every single play I had been in. So, I have these old, old photo albums of me doing *Camelot*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Sound of Music*. He documented my entire theatrical career between my junior high school and high school years. (laughs) He just didn't really have much relational skills. My mother used to say, "He loves you. He

just doesn't know how to show it." And I'm like, *pfff*, (sticks out tongue) you know.

But I understand it now. I understand what he was up against and he was really heartbroken and bitter, and I really think he died of a broken heart. He never intended to stay here. He was here to make some money, to go get the house and bring us back home to Puerto Rico. We never got back home and my dad ended up working nights, doing security work.

And my mom got very ill from my early, early, early childhood. She had an array of different illnesses. Probably now they would call it chronic fatigue syndrome, combined with arthritis, heart disease. She used to get these welts in her legs, which to this day no one can explain what kind of disease gives you like these sores, these open sores on your legs. I used to take care of her, so I also didn't appreciate my family life because I was the caretaker. My mom was bedridden most of her life and I, as a kid, was not a very good housekeeper. I had school and community organizing to do and so it was really bitter at home because there was a breakdown there with my mom being ill all the time.

FOLLET: So she was both ill but also an Avon Lady. How did she combine that?

31:02

RODRIGUEZ: She would put on Avon makeup for about three hours. She would like really hook herself up, in bed. She would curl her hair and do her makeup, and it would take her all day to like all of a sudden get — once I propped her up and she would get her cane, we were off, and we would take taxis. She would have this route where she would sell Avon to all of the nurses in Beth Israel Hospital and Bellevue. She was very strategic, you know. So, she would just have to go to Bellevue or Beth Israel Hospital and get her spot usually at the pediatric clinic while I got checked. All the nurses would come down and pick up their Avon. (laughs)

FOLLET: Wow.

RODRIGUEZ: She would be very strategic with her energy and how much she could handle physically.

FOLLET: So when she was functioning as this sort of bridge between cultures for new immigrants and other women in the community, would they come to her? Would they come to your house?

RODRIGUEZ: Oh yes, all the time.

FOLLET: Do you remember any particular conversations or issues that would come up?

RODRIGUEZ: I remember that there was a woman from Ecuador and that she would come and visit. It was as if people would sit for tea, you know, they

would come and they would sit on the couch. There was this air of respect for my mom. She was like the godfather, or the godmother. (laughs) There was this air — and, you know, they would bring treats. I remember that she knew which clinic that you needed to go to, or which office you needed to go to, to get your social security or to get your Medicaid or to get whatever it was that you needed. There were women always on the phone. I mean, she was always on the phone, giving advice.

FOLLET: Do you remember any consistent messages that your mother gave out? Did she have an attitude about certain things? Did she have like a philosophy that she shared with these women?

RODRIGUEZ: I'm trying to translate it: Don't let anything keep you back. *No deje que te domine*. Don't allow it to dominate you. Her attitude was that this was a city of tremendous resources and opportunity, and you just needed to know how to navigate. So she apparently saw that she was good at it, saw that she was the navigator.

FOLLET: Were the questions mostly about navigating the city and the social systems? Do you remember discussions about personal issues?

34:28

RODRIGUEZ: Oh yes, and relationships as well, (laughs) especially relationships. Her message to me was just, Don't get married too soon. Go see the world, you know, go see the world, because apparently, she didn't see enough of the world before she got married. (laughs) So she was just like, Go see the world before you get married. Don't get married too soon. There's a whole mystery about my mother in that she married at 30. So there's this gap in my knowledge as to what did she do all that time.

FOLLET: How old had she been when she came to the United States?

RODRIGUEZ: Just a couple years prior to that. She came as an adult. She had two sisters, Lillian and Miriam. My mom was Elsa, and Oscar, her brother. My uncle Oscar was a Merchant Marine, so he traveled the world — a great character, like a pirate, always came with the coins (laughs) and showing all his stab wounds. He was great, Uncle Oscar. The three women and Uncle Oscar came to New York first and then brought my grandparents over, once they got an apartment. They all had an apartment like a block away from each other.

FOLLET: So it's your maternal grandparents when you mention your grandparents?

RODRIGUEZ: On St. Mark's Place. So they were all on Ninth Street, Second Avenue, Eighth Street. My mom didn't know my dad. So this was the early '50s. My dad had come here to study electronics and, apparently, find work. It was part of the whole Operation Bootstrap, where Puerto Ricans came

here to find work, because much of the economy was being stripped on the island. My father couldn't stomach American food. He used to get sick. So he put the word out that he was trying to find someone to cook Puerto Rican food, because he couldn't eat. (laughter)

And someone sent him to my grandmother, who was known as Mami Lucy, because she was like the town caretaker. She took care of all the kids. She was like a family daycare provider and they sent my father to my grandmother. And don't you know, my mom used to serve the dinner that my grandmother cooked, (laughs) and he would come for dinner every night. Apparently, I'm sure, I just picture my mom dressing up and making sure her hair was great for dinner, just to serve him his dinner. One thing led to the other. They got married and I appeared about nine months later, (laughs) and he was seven years younger than her.

FOLLET: Oh really?

RODRIGUEZ: I found that out later. I'm like, Oh really? Wait a minute. If you were 30, my dad was like 23. (laughs)

38:03

FOLLET: That's a big difference.

RODRIGUEZ: That's a big difference, in the '50s. So my mom has a lot of — I wish I had documented and archived her early life before she passed on, because there's this whole life that she had in Puerto Rico. I don't think she was too open about it with her family, so she didn't really share it with me much.

FOLLET: And you didn't get it from her sisters or Uncle Oscar?

RODRIGUEZ: My Aunt Miriam, who was the youngest, was like my favorite aunt. She died early, young, horribly. It was actually the same year my mom died.

FOLLET: When was that?

RODRIGUEZ: That was in 1990, in the midst of me getting my Sloan Scholarship from NYU [New York University] to do a — I had a fellowship to do my graduate work in public administration from the Wagner School. Aunt Miriam died during midterms and my mom died during finals. So, I'm a graduate school dropout because you know, I had two kids at the time. I was a single mom and losing both of them the same year, I just never went back. And now it's on tape that — you know, to this day, NYU is still figuring out what the hell happened. She just disappeared one day. (laughs) I always intended to go back. So I might go back one day and talk to them about the story. I actually want to. I want to go back to Wagner School and tell them the story, just to make amends and also see if maybe they'll still give me the fellowship. (laughs)

FOLLET: They just might.

RODRIGUEZ: I want to finish.

FOLLET: They just might. So, it was in junior high and high school, which would have — you graduated from high school when?

RODRIGUEZ: Seventy-four.

FOLLET: 1974. And you had been involved in, as you say, the Real Great Society programs that were enriching your neighborhood and enriching your life, and that connected art with politics. Was this all extracurricular stuff? It has to be if you were considering school prison-like.

RODRIGUEZ: School was extracurricular stuff. School was just something I had to get out of the way so I can make it to a meeting after school. I mean, I was that serious about community service, to the extent that my parents as well as a very close mother friend, who was the mother of my best friend in the building, she was offering me tuition to go to college after high school.

FOLLET: This neighbor?

41:28

RODRIGUEZ: Because I had grown up — when we moved to Ninth Street, I was five and Elisa was four, and she lived right upstairs from me and we kind of grew up as sisters, because I never had a sister. I just had one younger brother [whom I affectionately named Jimmy, although his name is Luis], and by the time we were 18, we had just been together every day. Her mom was like my second mom.

names

FOLLET: And she offered to pay for you to go to college?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. She's a very defining woman in my life, Muriel, because she was the one who educated us about Planned Parenthood and sent us to our first Planned Parenthood meeting. I remember sitting in a circle at Planned Parenthood and learning about all the contraceptive options we had and, you know, learning all about how to fit the diaphragm, and how to use the jelly. Everything was just so natural and so understandable, you know? She put everything in a really positive light for me, in terms of my sexuality and in terms of contraception, and Planned Parenthood. My parents living downstairs would have like hit the roof if they knew that Muriel had taken me to Planned Parenthood for my first diaphragm. (laughs)

Muriel, when I graduated from high school, I turned her down when she offered me college tuition, because I was so fed up with school, was counting the days to finally get out of high school, and wanted to devote at least a year to community service, and really work on the housing

issues that we were working on and really focus on community organizing. She thought I was insane.

FOLLET: Muriel did?

RODRIGUEZ: (nods) And really, it wasn't that I was turning the money down. I was saying that I wanted a year and that I would go to college a year later, but I needed that year. I just couldn't see myself going into another institution. I always felt repressed and oppressed in the academic environment.

FOLLET: So what did you actually do with that year?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, what happened was is that she said if you don't go now, I rescind my offer, and I turned it down. So, the year is foggy. It might come back to me. But indeed, I did a lot of dancing. Talk about what community organizing did you do: (laughs) I did a lot of dance. I taught dance to make money. I taught dance at daycare centers with children. I taught dance at the Fresh Air Fund camps in the summer. There was another camp, I don't recall the name of it. I not only performed with professional dance companies in Afro-Puerto Rican folkloric *bomba y plena* dance, we would perform. I eventually created my own dance company.

FOLLET: Oh, you did?

45:40

RODRIGUEZ: Mm-hmm. I was learning about how to be a board member. I was involved in board governance in the organizations.

FOLLET: Which organizations at this time?

RODRIGUEZ: CHARAS/El Bojio. [See <http://www.charas.org>]

FOLLET: What does that stand for?

RODRIGUEZ: CHARAS stands for — C-H-A-R-A-S stands for the five founders. There's Chino Garcia, Armando Perez, Roy Baptiste, Sal Becker and Angelo Gonzales. They were the five founders of CHARAS. They took me under their wing and in addition to being the worksite for me to have all these summer job opportunities, were involving me in their governance, in the development of their organization. I would man the office if the office needed manning. I would help with a proposal if a proposal needed work. That's how we ran: we ran as a collective. The organizations ran as collectives. So, if you showed up after school or you showed up at whatever time you showed up, you did an inventory of what was needed to do that day or who was out and who wasn't picking up the phone. It wasn't like you had one steady receptionist. It was like who was ever available to take the phone at the time. But the

thing was, then the organizations in the Lower East Side also had a collective. So CHARAS would work with Teatro Ambulante, Seven Loaves, Fourth Street I, on community issues. So, one would take the lead on doing a street protest or doing any kind of community action and all of us would be involved.

So there was a lot of meetings that would go on, organizing meetings regarding tenants rights, regarding cleanup, garbage issues, regarding the schools, what was happening with the kids. It was very similar to what the Young Lords were doing in El Barrio. We were south. We were on the Lower East Side and the Young Lords were doing similar work in what some call Spanish Harlem, which you know, we call El Barrio. And so it was all — it wasn't any one particular issue. Social justice had to do with the community and the needs of the family. So you didn't compartmentalize that this was a woman's issue, this was a child health issue, this was a housing issue. It was community issues, whatever was at hand. You were abreast of all of the issues and what community actions were going on around that.

The thing was, since I was the young generation, I was the one receiving a lot of it, because their approach apparently was to keep the kids from drugs and keep them from further gang involvement. And so, although it looked like we were having a whole lot of fun, we were teaching kids about their Puerto Rican culture by teaching them *bomba y plena*. We were keeping kids off the street if we were teaching them how to do silkscreen. I became like a youth counselor where then, everything that I had learned, I was then teaching the younger kids in the different storefronts, if you can imagine. A block might have had like six storefronts where there was silkscreening going on in one place and then there was theater work going on in another. Then there was the Nuyorican Poets Café and then in the evening, people would come, those who were doing writing, in Miguel Algarin's apartment, which was across the street. There was a place to go and just write or share stuff and mount stuff of other writers and then in the evening, we would congregate at the Poets Café and people would read their work. [Algarin is founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and professor at Rutgers University].

50:55

FOLLET: Where was the funding for all this coming from?

RODRIGUEZ: That's the Real Great Society thing. I apologize, because since I was from the younger generation, I haven't done my homework on this, but that was an initiative, a government-funding initiative back in those days that really poured huge grants into community-based organizations. And then of course, then it all slipped away.

FOLLET: Was the writing, the theater, the silkscreening, the Puerto Rican culture, was the medium the message or were there explicit –

RODRIGUEZ: It wasn't the medium. It was what we were hearing in those poems.

FOLLET: OK, that's my question.

RODRIGUEZ: It's what you were hearing in those poems. Many of the Latino adults that I was around — because I was around a lot of older adults — their poetry had to do with the inequities, the struggles on the Puerto Rican island still. The women would write about violence or their lives. They were writing about the inequality and the degradation under which people had to live in these communities that we all migrated into, and crying out for human dignity for their people. So, that was the message, that we had to find some solutions for our people to live a dignified quality of life.

Out of that came, and you'll see in my documents, the *Quality of Life* magazine I've collected over the years. There was a community newsletter called *Quality of Life* in Loisaida ["Spanglish" for Lower East Side]. If there was anything that unified all these issues or an overall theme, it was the quality of life in Loisaida, that we were left with appalling, appalling living conditions and we ourselves galvanized and organized ourselves to clean up the drug-infested, needle-infested parks and lots, and create gardens. We were left with abandoned buildings and horrible, rat-infested tenements. It was through community organizing that we galvanized and cleaned up those buildings, and created a quality of life that any human being deserves.

FOLLET: Is "we" at this point largely a Puerto Rican community of people that you're working with?

RODRIGUEZ: Actually, in the Lower East Side it was very, very mixed. Although that's where I learned my Puerto Rican history and I was exposed to the Puerto Rican folklore and folkloric music and dance that I ended up excelling in and then teaching it — because there were many Puerto Ricans involved in this movement — it was not at all a Puerto Rican movement. The Young Lords was a Puerto Rican movement.

FOLLET: Right.

55:20

RODRIGUEZ: In the Lower East Side, there were a substantial number of Puerto Ricans involved. However, it was racially, ethnically and generationally very mixed. It did not prepare me for when I left the Lower East Side and started seeing the rest of the world and the city. It really didn't because again, I was surprised that it wasn't as ethnically mixed as the community that I was used to. I mean, that's why I was drawn to it as opposed to what would happen in the school system, where it was ethnically mixed but they would like self-segregate. And that didn't happen on the Lower East Side.

FOLLET: So it was racially diverse. What about class? Were there common class connections in this?

RODRIGUEZ: I've always had a reluctance to use the word class in referring to people and I really don't see it as an appropriate word. Like if some people want to talk about low, middle — I would say income. It was like low income, middle income. Because for example, my family was low income but they came from a high-class family in Puerto Rico. If my mom ever instilled anything, it was that she was high class and wasn't about to go low class just because she didn't have no money. That's why you become an Avon Lady, so there's always extra cash if Daddy doesn't bring enough money. But she was always high class and had married a working-class man. From there, I saw that you know, people don't have a class, they have an income, and they live accordingly to that income level. In the Lower East Side, there was low-income individuals that were primarily involved in the community organizing, but there were international people, people from outside races of all levels of income coming in, either interviewing us and observing us as an odd phenomenon or actually working hand in hand with us, like Buckminster Fuller, Susan Sarandon and others [like David Robeson, son of Paul Robeson].

FOLLET: [These people] were involved in your work or visited your sites?

58:40

RODRIGUEZ: Indeed, indeed. All I had to do was walk maybe three blocks home to Second Avenue and go upstairs to Elisa's house and I was in a whole other class, yes. That's a book that I have yet to write. Living downstairs in my family's class — to use the word I don't use — the floors were linoleum, the plates were plastic, the vegetables were canned, okay? Get the picture? Then you go up one flight. Muriel's apartment was the same as ours, only she had an extra bedroom because the hallway downstairs, we were on the first floor, didn't have room for that bedroom. Everything was carpeted, beautiful rugs, wooden plates, green salad, not iceberg. So at home I would get iceberg and tomato with some corn and then I'd go to Muriel's house and it would be a wooden bowl and a wooden plate, and I'd get like romaine with homemade dressing. And it was just, I lived in two different worlds in my building. Because I was welcome there as part of the family and was there almost every day. Muriel and my mother, Elsa, would have these meetings about me and Elisa's toys because we always wanted what we each had and my mom can't afford the beautiful wooden dollhouses that she had. I had a plastic Barbie Doll house. I wanted the beautiful handmade, wooden dollhouse with the little pieces of real furniture.

So indeed, just talking about it, I'm realizing why I have such a reluctance or an aversion to that word, class. Because it's always been a message like, You're not that class, so you don't get the wooden dollhouse, kind of thing. And I would see how my mom would struggle in pain, trying to make money so that I would have the same dress that Elisa had for Christmas, kind of thing. I don't appreciate how people are classified by class when it really has to do with economic ability and

economic opportunity and has more to do with your economic standing — because there are people that have very low economic standing who are true high-class people, true high-class people. And I saw that throughout my young life in that experience.

In Teatro Ambulante, Bimbo Rivas, who passed away I believe it was '95, was one of our leading poets and playwrights within the Puerto Rican New York community, along with Miguel Piñero and Pedro Pietri. There are some icons in our literary, twentieth-century writers within the Puerto Rican New York community. Bimbo Rivas is one of the least known, but he and Felipe Luciano, who was more known and was in the Young Lords Party and later became a familiar name.

FOLLET: This is going to start to flash in a second. It just means we have a minute left on this tape.

RODRIGUEZ: They introduced us to Jorge Brandon, who, for all intents and purposes, was like a vagabond, homeless man who carried around this cart with all sorts of bells and whistles, and no one would ever go near this man. He was just like a homeless. But he would recite volumes of poetry verbatim that he himself had written. Tato Laviera, Felipe and Bimbo Rivas, who introduced Jorge Brandon to us as one of Puerto Rico's greatest poets, they archived him as he was alive. Do you know what I'm saying? He was discarded as a human being, as a homeless man, and they archived him. They just cared for him, they fed him, and they introduced us young people to Jorge Brandon and we would sit and listen to him for hours. I once told my mother this story and she says, "I remember Jorge Brandon with a white suit, white hat, white shoes, in Puerto Rico, in the plaza, reciting poetry to all the ladies." So in Puerto Rico, he was a high class, top grade.

FOLLET: We're out of time.

104:40

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

FOLLET: Let's finish that story, because I think we lost it at the end of the other tape. So before we move on, finish that story about the fellow who was discarded as a homeless person.

RODRIGUEZ: I never really quite understood what the significance was to this Jorge Brandon guy. He just was a stinky old guy who used to keep chicken drumsticks in his pocket. But he would go rambling on and on and on, for hours. He could recite these very intricate, Spanish-language prose and poems. It turns out not only had he written them himself but when I was mentioning something about him at home when my mother was crying about how I was wasting my life out in the street instead of going to college, I was telling her that we do important work. I don't know how the subject came up on Jorge Brandon, but we felt it was important to take care of him and to make sure that he was OK because he was some kind of important poet. And she, in her bed, sat up and said, Jorge Brandon? I'm like, Yes, and she says, "Jorge Brandon is one of our leading poet laureates and I recall going" — every town in Puerto Rico has a *placita*, a little plaza where people would go and gather and flirt. And Jorge Brandon, she recalls, going to the *placitas* all in white: white suit, white shoes, white hat, a very high-class poet laureate, and recite poetry in the plazas. That's part of our culture, you know, to be orators and storytellers and recite poetry without looking at your notes, kind of thing.

There it was for me, as a young girl, two examples: my mother, bedridden, living in terrible physical as well as economic conditions. Emotionally she was extremely clinically depressed; Jorge Brandon, living as a homeless man, somewhat mentally off, and you would look for moments of that lucidity when his brilliance would come out. But they were both from very high-class, astute peoples from the island. My mother used to tell me stories about how she lived in this estate where there was a maid for every child. So she had a maid, her sister had a maid.

FOLLET: That was her family background?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. They lived a really good life when they were young, a really good life. So, they were probably like nannies but this is where I got this thing about not even acknowledging that term you know, high class, low class, middle class. It's really how much money do you make right now and what can you afford in terms of class and categorization, because people can't be categorized. People could be brilliant and insane in one day. I've got a newfound respect for both Jorge Brandon and my mother, you know, that people go through a lot. Everyone has a story.

FOLLET: Right. You mentioned the Young Lords being active at the same time that you were doing your community and cultural work.

5:10

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think it was more accurate to say that the Young Lords, the height of their movement was in the '60s and I was coming of age in that community organizing and community service activity in the early '70s. So again, I benefited from the Young Lords, the Black Panther movement, the civil rights movement, and was being influenced by young adults that had all been involved in those movements. I gained a lot of political awareness as well as social justice awareness, these principles and values that were instilled in me. One was to always give back and the other was to work collectively, that everyone had a voice — which, to this day, is still a resounding principle in SisterSong. Those were my roots. That's where and how I was exposed —

FOLLET: You mentioned Buckminster Fuller as a specific influence —

RODRIGUEZ: — in their lives.

FOLLET: — in their lives. Were there specific political messages, political ideas, political theories that you consciously either absorbed or talked about as a group?

RODRIGUEZ: Because of Buckminster Fuller's influence, there was a lot of talk about alternative lifestyles or alternative — that we had to think about how there were alternative ways of living outside of this drug-infested Lower East Side, that this was not the end of our universe. There was a lot of sharing about environmental and sustainable building of homes, and that was the dream, that we were going to be building green homes.

FOLLET: Did you use that term at the time?

RODRIGUEZ: No. That's what we're calling it now. We were calling them geodesic domes. (laughs) [We often read *The Whole Earth Catalog*]. They were all going to be domes. We wanted to buy land. We actually built domes in abandoned lots in our neighborhoods. They would build different types. We were experimenting with what would work for when we did, you know, move to Shangri La, I suppose. You know, we had this dream. The politics was about, in that epoca, in that timeframe, most of the politics had to do [with] organizing around landlords because there were just slumlords that were either burning buildings down to get insurance or really allowing tenement buildings to get so dilapidated to dissuade people from living there.

In retrospect, what was happening is that we were fighting this whole tidal wave. Are you kidding? It was like a tsunami wave of gentrification that was coming into our neighborhood after we had beautified it with the gardens and the renovated buildings. Nobody wanted the Lower East Side. Nobody wanted to live there. Nobody was interested in it. It wasn't regarded as prime real estate. But the Village was getting a little overcrowded, Greenwich Village, and it was moving

east. It was grassroots political organizing around tenants' rights, educating tenants and bringing landlords to court. That was the politics that I was most exposed to at that time.

There was a whole debate about how — especially Armando Perez, who eventually became district leader before he was murdered a few years back. He was the one that felt we should all be really involved in politics in terms of running for office and being more politically involved and gaining posts in office as community district leaders, council people, et cetera. Most of us, I remember like debates and arguments about how we were grassroots, we were working for the people, and it was all about, you know, the grassroots level and organizing the people and not being a sellout. Armando kept saying, There really isn't going to be any sustainable change in this community or for our people if we don't get involved in the political process, if we don't become part of the political process.

And so, I was one of the ones that were — or, I was influenced more by the ones that were resistant to that. I was very turned off to the whole political process and kind of tuned myself off where others did, you know, make what I consider a great sacrifice, which was to go deal with the internal navigation of that world, of that arena, to hopefully make an impact.

FOLLET: Were you seeking incremental change? Did you talk about revolution? How did you think about or debate what you were doing?

13:00

RODRIGUEZ: I think the fact that what we were doing was trying to create a dignified quality of life and create opportunities for home ownership, that was revolutionary (laughs) in and of itself, when you consider we were in a climate where the landlords and the landowners were trying to get us out of there.

FOLLET: Were you connected to, in an organizational way, or influenced by any groups outside of the city, any national groups or other movements that you were aware of?

RODRIGUEZ: As a young girl there?

FOLLET: Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: No. Later, yes, once I went to college and got involved in other groups, but we're still just talking about my youth. My world was my community, and it was a whole national movement just within a radius of ten blocks. (laughs)

FOLLET: So did you, at some point, decide to move out of that and go to college? What was the transition out of that for you or on to the next thing?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I honored my word and tried to get back into college a year later but then I didn't have any money and was told to apply as an independent student. I had to be independent for a full two years and I had moved out of my home. I continued working at the 519 East Eleventh Street building and helped finish the entire building.

I moved in and won a scholarship to go to Pratt Institute as a dance major. I had accumulated enough experience in teaching dance and performing that I was accepted at Pratt Institute and got a scholarship to go to Pratt as a dance major. I went to Pratt for two years and then transferred to NYU as a dance therapy major, and so my world started opening up. Now that we're talking about my world opening up, Chino Garcia, Armando Perez and the guys at CHARAS, back in those early days were also going to Outward Bound and coming back with all these stories about all their adventures at Hurricane Island, rock climbing and all this team-building stuff that they were doing in Outward Bound, but it was only guys. I kept saying, "Well, why can't the women go?" (laughs) I was all of 16 — you know, what women? (laughs) I was always fussing about how they'd get to go on all the trips, and they arranged for me to be one of the first women to go when it opened up to women. And so, they sent me to Outward Bound.

17:15

FOLLET: They did?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, and that was a very defining moment for me because I was outside of the Lower East Side.

FOLLET: Where were you?

RODRIGUEZ: Off the coast of Maine, at Hurricane Island, climbing quarries with hardly no footholds, and sailing in whale boats and navigating and finding other islands. If we didn't find the islands, we would just eat peanut butter in the boats.

FOLLET: No. I'm just visualizing you adrift on the wide-open sea.

RODRIGUEZ: One of the most traumatic things for me, aside from climbing a quarry, a huge, high quarry, was having to jog three miles around the circumference of the island in climbing boots because I didn't have sneakers, along with these girls from Colorado and California. I didn't know what jogging was. I was a city kid. (laughs) Back then, jogging was not in our vocabulary and nobody could have breakfast until I finished my three miles. So if it meant just dragging me as I cried, "Chino, I want off this island!" (laughs) Once we were done with the jogging, we had to jump off of a pier into the freezing cold ocean, before breakfast. I eventually adjusted and began loving it.

FOLLET: Really?

RODRIGUEZ: I began really, really loving it, seeing my first Big Dipper. I had never seen the Big Dipper and I was just like crashed and exhausted on Brimstone Island. The whole island was black stones instead of sand, and I was just fascinated by that. And when I laid back, all of a sudden the Big Dipper was real. (laughs) I had only saw it on cartoons. (sings) “*Would you like to swing on a star?*”

So I found that I could do stuff and I believe that that’s part of the mission of Outward Bound, was to show you that you could achieve beyond your wildest dreams or beyond your perceived limitations. All they ever did was ask me to try. They didn’t force me to do anything. But they never stopped asking me to try (laughs) and I was able to repel off cliffs, climb quarries. I was at the helm of a huge whale boat and learned how to navigate the oceans and do solo, which was to be three days on an island and scavenge for your own survival. It really opened up my mind to not allowing for limitations, that almost anything was possible and that there was a whole world out there.

That’s where my politics grew. I mean, everybody says, you know, what political theory did you get into or what were you — my politics was that there’s a whole world out there and here we are trying to fight and struggle over this little piece of land that we’re never going to have. As I started going to college and meeting other people from other walks of life and also growing up, also connecting with the other communities, there was still a very vital community in East Harlem, in El Barrio, as well as in the arts. Aside from community organizing, the arts were tremendous in El Barrio. There were also cafés where there was poetry recitals going on, combined with galleries and the painters. All of my friends, the people that were my friends, were pretty much all artists and writers and painters. All were very committed to their community. In one respect or another, they were all either for the independence movement of Puerto Rico or for housing rights or, you know, involved in hunger and homelessness or domestic violence. Everyone was involved in speaking for the inequities and the injustices that our community was facing and living under.

FOLLET: What thing prompted you in the first place to raise the question of why aren’t any of the women allowed to go to Outward Bound? Where did that challenge come from?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, there was internal politics going on. Many of the community “leaders” were all men. Many of the poets that everybody knows about from the Puerto Rican community are the men, and there were brilliant female poets at the time.

23:30

FOLLET: That you were aware of?

RODRIGUEZ: That I was aware of, that were publishing, but they were — women were not always included in this collective decision making. (laughs)

You started seeing the rifts and the differences. We were dealing with a bunch of machos.

FOLLET: So how did this come up for you? When did this start to rankle?

RODRIGUEZ: I started growing up. [When] I was a kid, I would be happy to run the errands and I was so idealistic about this theory of working collectively, and I saw how there were some that were very opportunistic about that and had some of us doing the grunt work while the others got the scholarships to go to Outward Bound and go here and go to Colorado and go to Maine. We were stuck with the grunt work. I was committed to the grunt work but I noticed that there was a pattern of who was going out. It was understandable because they were the ones that were recognized by outside people as the community leaders at the time. But I was hearing stories of their trips and I was fascinated. I was enthralled and I wanted to see the world and I wanted to know how come they were always the ones going.

Chino was, and still is — Chino Garcia — a mentor to me because whenever I had a question like that, he would really, sincerely, genuinely listen and do something about it. If ever I said, you know, I would really like to — I wonder what painting was like. And the next thing I knew, I was in a painting class or something. I'm just making that up but when I said, "Well, why is it just guys that are going to Outward Bound?" He said, "You want to go to Outward Bound?" And I'm like, Yes, I would go, I would go in a minute. And so, he looked into it. He looked into it, got me a scholarship and the next thing I knew, I was calling his name at the top of a quarry cursing him for sending me to Outward Bound. (laughs)

FOLLET: Now, were you in college already, or is this pre-college?

RODRIGUEZ: I was 16 when I went to Outward Bound.

FOLLET: So you were only 16, OK.

RODRIGUEZ: We started talking about college and you asked me about where did my world open up nationally. It was back then that my world really opened up. That's what reminded me of Outward Bound. There are certain projects or trips that I've taken that were defining for me in that respect, and so it reminded me of Outward Bound, but that was when I was 16. Actually, you had to be sixteen and a half and Outward Bound people wrote back and said that they noticed that I was ineligible but that — Chino put it like, the punishment is, is that you're going. (laughter) That's how I remember it. So guess what the punishment is: you're going!

26:55

My politics grew out of being surrounded by people that had been politically involved in the Puerto Rican independence movement. Those individuals were not just involved in the independence of Puerto Rico.

They were involved in all sorts of social justice issues that Puerto Rican communities were facing as they were migrating into New York: literacy, equality in employment, environment, housing, healthcare, education for their children. Everything was an issue and so, learning about Puerto Rican history as a New York Puerto Rican sort of empowers you, because you gain this identity and this affinity for your tribe, so to speak. You learn where you came from and what your roots are. But then you hear the stories of tremendous and profound injustices throughout the history of Puerto Rico and what was done to Puerto Rican people and you begin cultivating a political consciousness of your choice.

But you cannot escape the indignation. You cannot escape being infuriated at some of the stories of what's happened, one being that there was all this talk among Puerto Rican women in my community about *la operacion*, the operation, and the whole history of sterilization abuse of Puerto Rican women. When I was younger, I didn't quite understand what it was, but I knew the term and I knew of talk of it. As I grew into a young woman and learned how to do research in college and how to process political information, I began really finding out for myself what the hell that really meant, that it really was a systematic population-control strategy, sterilizing tens of thousands of Puerto Rican women. And in that inquiry, I learned about the human experimentation of Puerto Rican women to develop or figure out the appropriate dose of the contraceptive pill. That totally infuriated me. I was incensed as I learned more and more about how they did it, about the writings and the dialogues that the doctors would have in reference to the women. And they were not regarded as women, they were subjects. We were guinea pigs and there was no sense of remorse, no sense of conscience in implementing that experiment. To me, how I personally gained consciousness about what reproductive rights was being exposed to that history of Puerto Rican women.

FOLLET: When did you begin to engage it differently? You said you had grown up hearing about *la operacion*: maybe some of your mother's conversations?

RODRIGUEZ: Probably. I knew that there was a video somewhere in the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, kind of thing. You know, there was reference to it. I've always been around people that were older than me, so that I would absorb conversations but not always understand everything that I was taking in.

32:45

FOLLET: Do you remember a particular moment when it just took on a particular significance for you, something where it wasn't just part of the background noise, where it was something that you had to deal with?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. It was just not getting all the pieces. You know, like asking questions and just, I wanted to know the whole story. I wanted to know

the details of it and it was just always like a rumor. You're in New York, you know, you meet women here and there. The meetings were about other things, not about sterilization abuse, and I wanted to — honestly, I don't know what it was. I remember that when I went to college, I learned the potential of research. I learned that there was a way to research things, and that's another defining moment for me that opened up my life and my universe because I had a list of things that I wanted to research.

FOLLET: And that was one of them.

RODRIGUEZ: And that was one of them. And it was primarily this whole issue about the pill. You heard less about that. There was less information and people knew less about that.

FOLLET: Now was this when you were at Pratt or NYU?

RODRIGUEZ: I was at NYU.

FOLLET: And did you do research on it?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. I did an entire research paper on it.

FOLLET: On the pill?

RODRIGUEZ: And I was never the same again. I was never the same again when I really researched it. The bibliography was as long as the paper because I just really got very engrossed in the actual act of research and then was so passionate about the subject matter. Then I would get so frustrated. I felt so helpless because it had happened in the past. There was nothing I could do for those women, you see? Then I said well, you know, I wasn't able to walk with Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement, you know what I'm saying? I came after all of that and I wasn't able to protest the practices that these pharmaceutical companies were implementing on these women. And then I realized that it was really pretty much covert and no one could have done it, because hardly nobody knew that it was happening until after the fact.

It was the first exposure I had to population control. I had no idea such things happened, you know, there was actual strategies that governments had to manipulate childbirth, manipulate cultures and the growth of cultures, and that my culture had been a real target for that. I never, ever took the contraceptive pill because of it.

FOLLET: Really?

36:55

RODRIGUEZ: Really, never, and just have always had a real pet peeve about it. I've gotten involved in a reproductive rights movement through the Latina organizations that were coming up in the '70s around reproductive

rights, but always with this sense that I couldn't do anything about that whole pill thing, that it was just something to be archived. That was a legacy that those pharmaceutical companies — they created a monster in me. That's the legacy that they left. Because to me, I am a tireless reproductive rights activist in that I feel that I owe something to those women, that they didn't die in vain, that they weren't mutilated in vain and that I will indeed tell the story in my fashion some day. This is all leading to that. You know, at some point it's going to come full circle, where that term paper is going to develop into a document that I want to share with the world. And although the story has been told, it's yet to be told in the way that I feel that it needs to be told.

FOLLET: So is it fair to say that when you focused your energy on researching the history of this and the actuality of the abuse around the pill and sterilization that you became a reproductive rights activist with that research?

RODRIGUEZ: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

FOLLET: Was CESA [Committee to End Sterilization Abuse] at that point in New York? Was Helen Rodriguez-Trias doing her work at that moment?

RODRIGUEZ: During that research, that's how I discovered the work of Helen Rodriguez-Trias. She became a hero for me in that here was this brilliant, Puerto Rican doctor who was a tremendous role model for me and other women in the field. I still have it and I think I forgot to bring it, but it's a little green booklet written by her.

FOLLET: Really?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, yes, and I had discovered it in the research that I had done.

FOLLET: But was CESA active at the time? Was she active in the city at that time? What did you do with this newfound commitment to reproductive rights? Where did you go with it?

RODRIGUEZ: There was the Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights. There were women that were at Hunter College that, although there wasn't like an established community-based organization, much of that research was at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College. So there were women there organizing and working around reproductive rights. I was in youth development. I had become a youth counselor, youth director, and was, in terms of my nonprofit work, in other areas. But as an individual, I had become a reproductive rights activist.

40:53

FOLLET: So you had graduated from high school in '74. You took a year –

RODRIGUEZ: Two. I had two years.

- FOLLET: Two years.
- RODRIGUEZ: Yes, I had to take two.
- FOLLET: Two years. So it's '76 before you got to Pratt.
- RODRIGUEZ: Seventy-six to '78 I'm in Pratt.
- FOLLET: You're at Pratt, and from '78 –
- RODRIGUEZ: Seventy-eight to '82 — it took — I lost 40 credits when I transferred [to NYU].
- FOLLET: I see, OK. So from '78 to '82 you're at NYU in the dance therapy program, right?
- RODRIGUEZ: Minor in education.
- FOLLET: Minor in education. And that's where you do your research on this project. So you're minoring in education, becoming a youth counselor and dance –
- RODRIGUEZ: I was going to be a dance therapist and then when I graduated college, or in my senior year, I learned that certification requirements have just been elevated to a master's degree, where prior to that it was a bachelor's, but they wanted to elevate the profession. (laughs) There were other community groups that I had been involved in throughout my youth, in addition to CHARAS and all of those, which was Henry Street Settlement. So, I was pretty disillusioned with the dance-therapy plan and did not find an outlet for what I wanted to do with dance therapy anyway, which was to work with physically disabled people, apply the dance-therapy concepts. The profession was going completely towards using dance therapy with mentally ill individuals. And they weren't going to certify me anyway.
- So what I did is what I always knew, is just go back to my roots and go back to the organizations that had cultivated me, and there was always a job there for me. So, at Henry Street Settlement, I became a youth counselor and ultimately a youth director. And then the Lower East Side Family Resource Center was a resource center run by women. And women there were creating and professionalizing family daycare, childcare within homes, for women who needed to be home — creating a home-based business and connecting them with women that needed to work, and being the bridge between the women that needed to work and the childcare providers so that it became somewhat of a cooperative.
- I tell you, reproductive rights was not the actual work I was doing, in terms of being in the day-to-day. It was something that was just growing and I was becoming more aware of the issues as I was growing into a

woman and a nonprofit professional. I was visited, when I was at the Family Resource Center, by Ellen Rosenthal, who was the director of an emergency food pantry called the Washington Heights Ecumenical Food Pantry, and she asked me if I would consider taking her post, because she was planning to leave. I said, "All my life I've been working with youth development, housing issues and women and children. What makes you think that I can run a hunger program? Where does that fit in?" And she said, "Well, why don't you just come and visit and see who's on the hunger line." And I did, and it was women and children.

So to me, it almost didn't matter what particular mission the community organization had, be it youth development, economic and childcare issues for women, women's health, hunger and homelessness, we were dealing with the same family: the women, the child, the grandparent. And the professional development that I was experiencing kept pushing me into these administrative roles, because apparently I had the skills and the knack to organize and run organizations the way they needed to be and keep them running. As I was exposed to Washington Heights and the hunger and homelessness issues there, I got involved with the Dominican Women's Development Center, and those were a group of immigrant women all supporting each other, just like my mom used to do. So there I became interim executive director when Rosita Romero had her first pregnancy. When she returned, I was assistant director there — women's issues. I never, as a social justice activist, never really separated all these issues. I mean, does that make sense? I never separated any of these issues.

In retrospect, I can tell you, when I did the research on the human experimentation on Puerto Rican women, I became a reproductive rights activist, as my consciousness was exposed to that. But in terms of my community work, I never separated those issues. It was about where my skills were needed, the same way when I walked into CHARAS when I was younger: do you need me on the phone, do you need me on the proposal, where do you need me?

So as my world kind of expanded to all of New York or Manhattan you know, (laughs) outside of the Lower East Side, then it was El Barrio, now it was Washington Heights. So where do you need me? Lehman College needs an adult literacy counselor: I could do that. Hispanic Federation needs a freelance grant writer to go to the different organizations: I could do that. Let me see, [Rosita Romero] needed an interim executive director: I could do that. I didn't know that they were going to go through their first audit when I took the post: I suppose I could do that. Let's look up audits, research how do you prepare for an audit.

50:25

FOLLET: There you go.

RODRIGUEZ: National School and Community Corps needs a supervisor of five AmeriCorps teams that are going to turn the five schools into

community schools and keep them open until nine o'clock at night and have resources and classes for the all the adults and children in the community: I can do that. They were all extensions of the community organizing work that I had done as a youth.

And then someone — and I really need to remember who it was — called me. I remember, I was driving from one school to the next because I was now supervising five community schools. AmeriCorps teams were developing programs in five [schools], so I was always in a car with a laptop, cellphone, beeper. I think it was a beeper, yes. (laughs) The technology of the early '90s, mid '90s. I need to think back at how I was exposed to the work of the Latina Roundtable, because when I got a call to tell me that I had just been recommended for the executive director position at Latina Roundtable, I was floored. I was honored. I was thrilled. I felt privileged. But at this moment, I don't recall how I was exposed to those women and the work of that organization and the other reproductive rights organizations. You know, I'm blocking right now. There's just a lack of memory because I was just always so busy.

Meanwhile, I was raising kids, you know what I'm saying? I'm like a really busy person and I don't remember all the details right this moment but I do recall really being thoughtful about crafting my cover letter because I wanted to convey to them how much an honor it was that I was even being considered for that position, and that I felt I was being called to arms. I remember writing that, that I saw that as I was being called to arms — like all that history of community organizing and working with all the different community issues was my boot camp training, and that when Latina Roundtable said that they needed me, then I felt I was being called to arms. And I had put that in the cover letter. I think that's what got me the job, maybe. (laughs)

FOLLET: But wow. Of all the things you had done. I mean, you had been at the Dominican Women's Center. Where does Casa Atabex come in here?

RODRIGUEZ: That was after Latina Roundtable.

FOLLET: Oh, that's after Latina Roundtable, OK. But you had been at the Dominican Women's Center, you had the AmeriCorps position. This has become a livelihood for you, right, these positions?

RODRIGUEZ: I had become a nonprofit administrator. That's what we would call it now. Much like my mom, I knew how to navigate the nonprofit system: how to cultivate foundations, how to process god-awful government RFPs [request for proposal], you know, government grants, how to navigate the staffing payroll, you know — all the internal administrative and nonprofit infrastructure stuff.

53:55

FOLLET: Much like your mom, that's so true.

RODRIGUEZ: And then if I felt that the mission was valid or it called to me or it was serving a vital need in the community, then I would be more than happy to play that role, even though frankly, I hated it. I hated it. It was not something that I enjoyed, having to run the internal administrative infrastructure of an organization. It was physically very draining and it took its toll on me quite a number of times physically, having the whole weight of an organization on your shoulder, meeting deadlines, writing proposals — and not just the proposal deadlines but the reporting deadlines. And having to juggle all of that and having it flow and managing people at the same time. And knowing that you were responsible for payroll for those people. This was not a job that I enjoyed. It came out of my commitment for social justice that if my skills were needed for that mission to go forward, then I would do it.

FOLLET: What would you have preferred to be doing?

RODRIGUEZ: I remember when, after six years of running the hunger program, I was so burnt out. I was physically ill. When Rosita asked me if I would consider — she and I had become friends and she knew that I was not happy and I was not doing well physically and when she asked me to consider being her interim executive director, I jumped at the chance. It was going to be part time, though. She said, “How are you going to manage this?” I literally managed three part-time jobs, enjoyed each and every one, and it was easier than being the executive director of the food pantry. I enjoyed being a counselor at Lehman College, you know, that one-on-one work with individuals who were so passionate, like you were talking about before, so focused and so passionate about their self-improvement. To support someone like that is just a joy. I was just like, Oh, you’re paying me for this. You know? It’s great.

Freelancing for Hispanic Federation as a grant writer gave me the enjoyable part of grant writing, which was not having the weight of the whole budget to raise the organization on your shoulders but going from organization to organization, looking at the project that they had designed and were trying to raise money for, working with the vision and crafting the narrative and the budgets that would explain the vision. That’s the fun part of fundraising — because ultimately, it’s manifesting a vision. So working with people like Tony Lopez, who was the director of ASPIRA at the time, and he was envisioning the whole Beacon School and what he would do with the Beacon School. It was exciting to do a proposal with someone like that, and I got paid for that kind of thing.

Being executive director of the Dominican Women’s Center you would think would be challenging: one, because it was, again, an executive director position. Also, I was practically, if not the only Puerto Rican women there. These were all Dominican women and there seemed to have been this stereotype that I never knew about that Dominicans and Puerto Ricans don’t get along. And luckily, I was naïve to that because I grew up on the Lower East Side, where that was not

part of my paradigm. Also, they were so healing to be around, for me. It was healing, you know. I was healing from being totally burnt out and these women were always so supportive of me and each other, and so nurturing right within the work, and so they modeled for me how to stay focused on the struggle, focused on the work at hand that's impossible, but staying true to yourself as a woman and nurturing yourself, and being a sister to the women that you worked with, which meant that if she wasn't nurturing herself you would nurture her or remind her that she was — you know?

And so, I was able to do tremendous, impossible work here, again, like in Outward Bound, without stressing. When I started working with the bookkeeper to prepare for the audit, the auditors informed me that since it was their first one, that they had to go back two more years and that this meant it was going to be a three-year audit. We were like, OK, that means we just have to triple this where we just did. Like the attitude — me and the bookkeeper were just like, Hmm, so we figured this much, now we've just got to like triple what we just did. Let's just think this — you know, it was like this healing environment under which you did a tremendous amount of work.

FOLLET: And is this different from the culture, the environment of the previous community organizing work that you had done?

RODRIGUEZ: I think so. I think that the early environments of community organizing and social justice work at the grassroots level then was self-sacrificing. It was just like from dawn to dusk you were working constantly. It was just one meeting after another, then the event, then after the event, the taking down of the dome. Even in the other professional positions I had, it was just daunting. It was daunting, the work that had to be done and the nurturing wasn't there. It was for the cause, you struggled for the cause and there wasn't any talk about nurturing and healing.

FOLLET: Does it matter that this is a specifically women's organization?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think of course that it does. I think that that's why they had this healing. That was my exposure. I mean, it wasn't the first women's organization, but it was the first one that really incorporated the notion of healing, sisterhood and nurturing, self-help, you know, being the nurturing end of it. Even those that did embrace that, it didn't always work.

FOLLET: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: I'm just saying the Dominican Women's Development Center makes it work.

FOLLET: Well we are flashing here, I think, right, which means it's lunchtime.
END TAPE 2

103:43

TAPE 3

FOLLET: So what do you think? The things you were saying as we walked over to lunch about what your sense of what the oral history is about and that maybe, there's some discomfort about it. How are you feeling about it? 1:25

RODRIGUEZ: I am feeling some discomfort.

FOLLET: OK, let's talk about that.

RODRIGUEZ: I'm trying to assess within myself where it's coming from. And it may take me some more time. But at this point, I think what it is, is that I've done the work that I've done in my life, or I do the work that I do because it needs to be done. It's just work that needs to be done, or it's just that's what my life is about. I don't think about myself as an "activist" or a reproductive rights activist. I'm very awed by those women who are indeed reproductive justice activists who have devoted years and years and years of their lives, and do have a tremendous, substantive track record of work and accomplishments they've done in the reproductive rights movement. And although I do indeed see that I have played a pivotal role in that story, I'm not of any importance in that story, is the way I see it.

Social justice is, in some arenas, a buzzword, you know, and for me, social justice is my life's work. This is just what I do. I don't know how to articulate that any better at this point. So then, that's why I began this morning with, why me?

FOLLET: Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: You know what I'm saying? Or if you start asking me about where was I during this time when an organization was created, or certain movements. The other discomfort I have is that I'm experiencing serious memory shortage. I have gaps in my memory and sometimes I'm like, My God, what was I doing, or why can't I remember, or there was something that I was doing but I don't remember the name. It's just really upsetting to me that I don't have the information as readily available in my own mind as I would like so that I could articulate certain things the way I would like. You can blame it on pre-menopause or there's a whole slew of things we might be able to blame it on. But it's just — I think that also, as much as I'm happy to do this, that if some of my documents or the stuff that I brought was like spread out and we were organizing it or people were asking me or you were asking me, where's this from or where's that from, there would then be a connection to the story that I guess we're trying to get. It's difficult sometimes for me to just sit without anything in front of me and try and remember everything or articulate my life, you know?

FOLLET: Right. 5:55

RODRIGUEZ: And it's also disconcerting that there's interest in collecting my documents, where I've been waiting to get to this point in my life to finally complete my documents, you know? The research paper needs to be a book. You've got unfinished plays that need to be fully developed. You've got scores of poetry that need to be put together in a volume. I have all this unfinished work that has come to the fore because now you're asking to collect it and I'm like, Well wait a minute, I'm not dying yet, I'm not finished. (laughs) It's a good thing because I've had to dust it all off. If not, I might have ignored it for another ten years. (laughs) But now, I'm starting to see the unfinished work I've yet to do, the story and what is that story. Most of the time, you're just busy doing and not thinking about the story that you're creating.

FOLLET: And you're young. It's not as if you are at a point where you feel as if you have completed either certain pieces or anything that resembles a totality, where you are reflecting back on something that you want to give some coherence to. I mean, this is just a fluky moment.

RODRIGUEZ: It makes you think of, or it made me think of my own mortality. It did make me reflect about how young or old I am or what that means. I'm not that young and I'm not that old but I'm not that young, and again, it's still a good experience because it's inspiring a coming of age, so to speak. I am coming of age and younger women look to me and look at me as if I've accomplished something. I'm like, What are you talking about, you know? (laughs) It's just that attitude. At the SisterSong conference in 2003 there were young women [who said to me], Oh, I've been following your work. I'm so glad to finally meet you. And I'm like, What work is she talking about, (laughs) you know?

FOLLET: But it is an odd thing, in a sense, what we're doing, because, I mean, how often does it happen that anyone sits any of us down and says, So tell me about just your life or who was important or what was your mother like or when did you do this and so, in a sustained way, you know, a sustained conversation where that's the purpose of the conversation. I think it's not something we experience very often, even if we sit down with our friends and we talk all the time, you know, every weekend, every Saturday night or something, this is a different kind of setup.

RODRIGUEZ: And I guess what's coming out for me is that I agree, it's great, the work that I've done. I agree, it's great. I've done some cool stuff, but it's nowhere at the caliber of the people that have put their lives on the line for social justice and civil rights. If I had my druthers, I would have been a dancer, a writer and a sculptor — seriously. This was not in my plan. However, in living around such inequities in gender as well as economic, quality of life, racial inequities, it was just unnatural to me not to be addressing the inequities that my community was facing and to

9:50

go off and do some sculpture and do my art. So, this is a calling to arms that I've been answering to all of my life and I don't think that it's going to end any time soon. (laughs) It is a goal of mine to come full circle and try and bring my creative life back, and for it not to be the sacrifice of my social justice work, but also not to have my creative life be sacrificed for it — not to mention that I've raised a family in the midst of all that. (laughs)

FOLLET: Not to mention.

RODRIGUEZ: I have been able to piece together plays and outlines of books and screenplays. So everything is still not done, but everything has its outline. There are lists of titles. Journals are organized by certain themes or genres, and most of my books are organized by either the work that we're doing, in terms of women's health and reproductive health or reproductive rights and self-help or this or that, but then there are other books that are about writing or writers that I'm following or writers that are writing about writing (laughs), or books that writers were influenced by and then books that were referencing a book that I read. I have a very interesting archive as well. (laughs) All this is going on in my head while I go about the business of now, teaching fundraising to nonprofits, to others that want to change the world.

FOLLET: I'm thinking of how in your youth, how immersed you were in the vibrant cultural setting, and that it's what's sustained you when there wasn't a separation between the art and the politics and the life.

RODRIGUEZ: And the types of issues that were being addressed, there was no separation.

FOLLET: Right. But something's different now.

RODRIGUEZ: Oh, absolutely. I think that there are several different factors to that. As a philanthropy specialist now, I see that a lot of that has to do with the way nonprofits that were doing social justice work were affected by philanthropy, which is very compartmentalized. They are our allies, very much so, in supporting us financially, but it is often in a very compartmentalized fashion, so that we have to then define ourselves to them in these compartments.

14:20

Even if one compartment was women's health, then there was women's heart health, where we got a grant at the Dominican Women's Development Center to do a literacy project for adult, basic education students, but it was funded by the Department of Health as well. I don't remember, it was years ago, but it had to do with healthy heart education. So we created a curriculum that was to be used by literacy teachers for adult learners but the content of the workbook that they would use had all healthy heart information and the healthy foods to eat and all about heart health, because it was the leading cause of death

among Latina women. So it wasn't just about women's health. We had to fit women's health into what grant was available — which was responding to a need that was identified, absolutely, but we don't work like that. Do you know what I'm saying?

We work more holistically with the woman and the family primarily, especially in the grassroots, where family, particularly for Puerto Ricans — but I don't see that to be any different in other cultures — is that family is so integral and often, one member of the family is suffering and perhaps doing — let's say the child is doing bad in school so we're tutoring, but we're not paying attention to the grandparent that's helping with homework that doesn't know English because the mother is working because she's got to have three jobs to pay the rent because the daddy's addicted to drugs or away at another job. And so, a colleague will be working on a drug rehab program three blocks away with the dad, we're over here tutoring the kid, and the grandparent is going to the senior citizen center for free lunch that's led by somebody else. And so, both public and private funding has come down in such compartmentalized fashion that it has diffused the manner in which we would, I believe, create solutions in our communities. That's one reason.

The other reason is that we've just got a limited amount of energy as human beings and we have to begin specializing and giving more laser focus to certain things while understanding that this is a multilayered problem. But I think that that's also why reproductive rights has evolved to include the human rights framework and more appropriately be called reproductive justice, because the human rights framework then does address the multilevel inequities. It speaks to gender inequity, to economic inequity, to health, housing, all of them.

So, I see in my life things coming full circle, where as a generalist, you would call it, or a holistic social justice activist, coming into the reproductive rights movement and playing a role that made an impact by conceptualizing the idea of SisterSong and leading it into its early birth, like a midwife, a doula, for SisterSong. Not always being welcomed in that arena during that time because I was not one of the leaders of the reproductive rights movement and many people didn't know me in the reproductive rights movement. So who the hell was I? You know, where did I come from all of a sudden with this idea for SisterSong? Now, reproductive rights is saying, Wait a minute, it's reproductive justice, we've got to incorporate everything. I'm like, Hello. (laughs)

It's like coming full circle, and my hope and aspiration is for that to happen with domestic violence, to happen with hunger and homelessness, happen among the housing rights groups, where they understand the human rights framework and how it unifies all of us and we need to stop working in isolation of each other just because we're specializing in different areas. So, I see the human rights framework as a very promising concept that promises for a stronger future for social justice activists and community-based organizations and community organizers.

Actually, when I look at some successful community-based organizations, it's because they've applied the human rights framework. We've been doing this. I'm like, Oh, it's not a new concept. I think that what's groundbreaking is applying it in practice. Now, the test is this wonderful theory of looking at human rights within a broader social justice and human rights framework, is an idea whose time has come but now, how does it look at the base? What does it look like to a group of reproductive health providers in a clinic in the Bronx? What does it look like to teen moms in California?

FOLLET: Right.

22:55

RODRIGUEZ: You know, how does it translate to them, and then, so what do we do with it or how is it going to make a difference in achieving reproductive rights? I think that those questions need to be asked but that the answers are promising. Because just watching a group of women listening to a human rights workshop and all of a sudden getting what their human rights are, and that they were actually like, This was like really authorized by the United Nations? You're kidding. It's almost like people grow a couple of inches and get some agency to them. They get empowered just by the knowledge of it, just by the knowledge of it.

And if we can just make a shift in the apathy that most people have about their lives and the lack of agency that they have in their lives, that good things are going to happen, there will be social change. But it's not going to come from a foundation. It's not going to come from a government grant. It has to come from the base. Social change has to occur within the grassroots, and I know that that sounds kind of cliché-ish but we can't forget that as we intellectualize all these wonderful concepts. I'm still grappling with how do you translate this in Spanish so women understand the reproductive justice framework. The language in and of itself is powerful, and how you use it, how you use language. So again, reproductive justice is a very powerful term linguistically.

FOLLET: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: Because it's not about addressing a negative. Like when you're fighting for a right, it's almost like oxymoronic to be fighting for peace or if you're fighting for certain rights, that means you don't have them and you're trying to achieve them. But if you stand for justice, the assumption is that you're endowed with justice and that it's not coming out of a negative, even though there may be injustices. But to stand for justice, at least, is more empowering, and people need to be educated about what justice means.

FOLLET: So there's a moment where your prior work, which was at the base and was multifaceted, became focused on reproductive rights because you got that phone call inviting you to consider joining the staff of the Latina Roundtable. You mentioned that that was not an easy transition.

RODRIGUEZ: No, it wasn't.

27:22

FOLLET: Can we trace that story, I mean, kind of swing back to that moment of your entry into reproductive rights that now leads to reproductive justice: can we go back?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, here I am stepping into another executive director position again. If you recall, I had been burnt out in the last executive director position physically and was having a great time doing work at the base. I was counseling, doing community schools, doing healthy heart literacy curriculums. That's where I have fun, working at the base with the people and not worrying about the next –

FOLLET: Audit.

RODRIGUEZ: Audit yes, that's a good one. (laughs) But I also, as I told you, if I'm being called to arms and my skills or my weapons are needed, then I don't question it, I don't even think twice about it. And here it was, one of the issues that I was most passionate about but had not had the opportunity to do anything about those women, that I still felt that I needed to do something about vindicating those women.

FOLLET: The Puerto Rican women who had been –

RODRIGUEZ: The Puerto Rican women that had been used as guinea pigs for the pill, and of course all of those that had been sterilized. There was something there about those women that it was just — they were fewer in number and their story was not as known. But anyway, how all these women were using the pill now on the shoulders of those women they didn't even know. They didn't even know. At the Latina Roundtable for Health and Reproductive Rights, it was a one-person shop. There was no staff to work with other than the board of directors, and it was primarily a policy institution that developed policy positions and dealt with reproductive rights policies. However, the board did indeed want to develop some more programmatic work around that, and that was my charge. They knew that I was the visionary that does well with creating programs or designing programs and that's where I excelled. So I was coming in visualizing what programs could flourish out of the policy work that the Latina Roundtable had done up until then. And without a staff, it's not easy to even try out programs. (laughs)

FOLLET: It was really a one-person thing?

30:45

RODRIGUEZ: It was really.

FOLLET: So Wilma?

RODRIGUEZ: There was no staff, it was just Wilma [Montanez]. And so what I did, is that I recruited college interns from public health departments –

FOLLET: You're good.

RODRIGUEZ: – and created this dynamic team. We've got pictures of all these — they just happen to all be gorgeous. I didn't put that in the job description. (laughs) But they just happen to all be these gorgeous, powerful young women that were totally on board, ready to just hit the road running. We did some great things. We got involved in a taskforce with the HIV Law Project around testing of a drug that was being done without informed consent to minimize or eliminate HIV transmission to the fetus. Now it's on the market. But we were involved, we were the watchdogs in trying to, first of all, inform women that were going in. Primarily, it was African American women who were substance abusers, or not, that were just being pressured to take this drug to try and save their babies because they were HIV-positive. We knew that they were in the testing stages. Well, wouldn't you know. And then I was at a speaking engagement, I believe it was a funders' briefing, where I talked about the inequities of access to healthcare among women of color, primarily poor women of color.

FOLLET: Excuse me.

RODRIGUEZ: Mm-hmm.

33:00

[Interruption: phone call].

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

FOLLET: So we spent a good amount of time last night processing this whole thing and where to pick up. Do you want to decide what our priorities are before we get going?

RODRIGUEZ: OK.

FOLLET: What's your sense after thinking about our discussion last night?

RODRIGUEZ: My sense is that we should tell the story of the beginnings of SisterSong, which we all feel is a very important story and is often a story that's asked about a lot.

FOLLET: OK.

RODRIGUEZ: I think the single most significant contribution that I've made to reproductive rights is being part of the early birthing of SisterSong. And that story needs to be told, because it has come so far and is so promising in terms of its future, that the history of SisterSong is really important for everyone to know about. The other thing is that as we reflected on all of the different paths that led me to SisterSong and being more active in the reproductive rights movement, I think that the most important element we both identify as something that people should know was that I was a single mom raising five children and that I really never considered myself being part of a movement. It was just what I did and it was just, the day-to-day struggle was what was ever-present on my mind. And one doesn't notice when one is part of a movement until you look back and you see there's been some movement. (laughs) Your experience of it is that you're struggling day in and day out trying to survive as an organization or as a family.

The most powerful thing about SisterSong is that we were successful in doing collectively what we could not do individually, and that we learned how to work collectively in such a way that, although we were each just making modest contributions and sometimes not so modest contributions, but that the culmination of all those contributions and working as a collective made a much greater impact. We made great strides along the way by using that mechanism. It was also groundbreaking in that — well, let's begin with how it first began.

I was working at the Latina Roundtable, as we had discussed before, and I got a call from Reena Marcelo, the program officer at the Ford Foundation. She had heard me speak at a funders' briefing, where I had spoken about the crisis in the health of women of color. She asked to meet with me and when we met she explained that she was trying to create a funding strategy that would fund grassroots organizations that normally would not be funded by such a huge foundation as Ford, and that she wanted it to focus on reproductive tract infections, the socio-cultural barriers to educating women about reproductive tract infections,

its connection with cancer and HIV and sexuality — identify the barriers but also identify solutions to culturally appropriate health provision and strengthening the capacity of grassroots women of color organizations.

In that discussion, the way that I do, the way that I think, I immediately began drawing a conglomerate of small organizations, but in such a way that it wouldn't be small when presented to the Ford Foundation. Because of the history I had with collective activism in my own community, it made total sense to me to just create a collective of women of color organizations that represented different rural as well as urban communities and that were doing the work, that they were the ones with the solutions. I was not in any way at all thinking that I knew what the solution was. I saw myself as a strategist or a liaison to convene the women, for them to identify what the barriers were, where was the common ground, and give them an opportunity or create a condition for them to voice the solutions that they thought would work.

Actually, that's what happened. In those days, as well as in some conversations these days, when funders and others talk about communities of color or women of color, they're referring to African American, Latino and Asian American communities. I was very adamant about that if I was to be part of this or that, if this was to move forward under the Latina Roundtable, that it had to include indigenous women. You know, if we're going to talk about women of color, we needed to talk about or include the work of the indigenous women of America. So, Reena absolutely agreed and we moved forward with the intention of including four what we called mini-communities, which would represent those four ethnic communities, and looked at a structure where if we found four or identified four organizations within those ethnic communities, that we would form this collective of 16 organizations.

Reena Marcelo then took that idea and further developed it into connecting it with the Fourth International Congress on HIV/AIDS that was going to happen in Manila. The idea I had with convening these women fit perfectly with convening them before and after the conference in Manila, and that a delegation would go to Manila that were coming from these groups of women. So, I'm trying to describe a very dynamic inter-exchange and brainstorming that occurred between Reena Marcelo and myself that ultimately led to writing a concept paper to Ford and having those meetings and the delegation funded, which occurred in New York. The first roundtable occurred in New York, and after Manila the second roundtable occurred in Savannah, Georgia. So one was in '97 and the other one was in '98.

6:50

FOLLET: With Manila in the middle?

RODRIGUEZ: With Manila in the middle. I recall the delegation that went. It was Dazon Dixon, Suki Ports, myself and others that I don't recall right this minute. By the time we were in Savannah in our second symposium, as

it was called — I call it my roundtables, but it was the second symposium — what we did was introduce to the women, who had first of all identified their common barriers, their common histories, which was very striking in that when you looked at the history of indigenous women, African American women, Asian and Latina women, it was very striking and profound for me that in seeking commonality and common ground, what was striking was that the common history we had was sterilization abuse and human experimentation. So for me it was a very defining moment where that had been the one thing that had compelled me and opened my consciousness around reproductive justice and here I was hearing the same stories. It wasn't just Puerto Rican women. All of us had that in our histories and that was very profound.

I wish Reena Marcelo was here because she and I, we had this concept but when we put it in practice and saw it manifest, it got so powerful and so profound. It went over and beyond the issues of reproductive tract infections, (laughs) although of course that was important. What was most important was what happened when all these women got together and started talking.

FOLLET: What happened?

12:10

RODRIGUEZ: Well, it was just a sense of tremendous potential in the fact that we all seemed very powerful to one another, like we all had tremendous respect and admiration for each other and for the work that each of those individual women had done up until this point, and the pain of the struggle that they had all been through. Yet none of us felt that that was a big deal; that it was just what we did. There were some who then shared with us how this was attempted, this whole women of color coalition, collective movement of some sort to create a network to work collectively and strengthen all of the isolated grassroots organizations that had been marginalized. This had been attempted before, little convenings of groups for foundations to then observe what was — that had been attempted before and quite frankly, not handled as properly as it should have been.

FOLLET: By?

RODRIGUEZ: By the funders. You convene a group of experts in the field from the grassroots. You get all the information you need and then you go back and then you design a program as if you've designed the solution. You design a program and then you put out an RFP. Doesn't necessarily mean that those individuals or those organizations are going to get the funding after they helped you with the assessment. Some of us were very leery of that but we were assured that that's not what it was, not this time, that Reena Marcelo was actually coming from the grassroots herself, from the Philippines.

FOLLET: What was her background to this? Do you know what brought her to spark this, or would you say she sparked it?

RODRIGUEZ: Of course she did. She sparked it. She was at Ford Foundation for a period of time and she wanted to make an impact during the time that she was there. She came from a women's movement in the Philippines, from [San] Gabriel, I believe it was. And so she was — and I can't speak for her, but from my perspective, she was looking at this as an opportunity to use the resources that were at her fingertips and that she had some authority as to where it was going to go, to strengthen the grassroots. And she had figured out that it could be around what she was most expert at, which was reproductive tract infections, but she gave me the charge to figure out a funding strategy that would allow for the most under-resourced, under-funded organizations to get funding, and I went about creating a structure for that. What was going to then be done with that structure was going to be left to the women that were going to be part of this.

16:37

FOLLET: So these are conversations that went on in New York?

RODRIGUEZ: Mm-hmm, at the Latina Roundtable.

FOLLET: At the Latina Roundtable. So the meeting in preparation for Manila happened at the Latina Roundtable?

RODRIGUEZ: Right. We actually had a roundtable. It was wonderful.

FOLLET: And it was you and Dazon and maybe Barbara Skytears?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, Skytears couldn't make it but she was part of the planning of it. Something had occurred that prevented her from attending the actual meeting. Alice Skenandore was there. Luz Alvarez Martinez was there, of the people that still remain.

FOLLET: I see.

RODRIGUEZ: There was a list in the documents of who was invited and who attended. There was a lot of heat, to say the least. There was a lot of controversy among women in the reproductive health and rights field about this meeting. Not everybody could make it. Not everybody understood what was going to be discussed and didn't know whether they wanted to make it or not, and the invitation was open. Anybody that wanted to attend, that was in the reproductive health field, could attend and would be financed to attend this meeting.

FOLLET: To attend the New York meeting. Oh really? It was just an open call: come one, come all and we're going to start talking about this notion of bringing groups together for a long-term strategy?

RODRIGUEZ: Mm-hmm. I mean, Reena had identified certain key women that needed to be informed because then that's how the word would go out. I had an idea of who to inform within New York. We asked Skytears to then also inform those in the Native American community. The word got out. (pause in recording)

FOLLET: So the first meeting in New York, the first time this combination of people came together is when [you told] the goose story –

RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

FOLLET: And you brought it to the meeting?

RODRIGUEZ: I felt I had to, because there were — as you know, these were the leaders in reproductive health and rights. Many of them didn't know who I was and were saying like, Who is this Luz Rodriguez calling a meeting of reproductive health and rights leaders in the country? There was a lot of question as to who I was and what I was doing, and there was not enough understanding of the fact that this indeed was also a brainchild of Reena Marcelo, but not everybody knew who she was. There was a sense of cautiousness about attending this meeting. Indeed, the theme was to discuss reproductive tract infections' impact on women of color, potential solutions, and an exploration on how creating a network of women of color could strengthen each member of the network as well as enhance the provision of services that they were each providing.

19:18

Intellectually, it was understood that that's what it was all about, but there was this emotional and intangible dynamic as well. I had to think of something to introduce myself and who I was, and something that would open up this meeting and kind of create a condition where there would be real collective work done.

FOLLET: So there was skepticism?

RODRIGUEZ: There was skepticism.

FOLLET: Would you go so far as to say there were naysayers?

RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely.

FOLLET: Did the naysayers refuse to come or did they come and –

RODRIGUEZ: Both. Some naysayers refused to come and then they were angry later that they didn't come, because they weren't part of the funding. Some naysayers came to prove their point or were making sure that I knew that they were coming to prove their point. (laughs) To me, it was just

like I didn't understand what was going on. What were they naysaying about? We haven't even started. (laughs)

FOLLET: What point did they –

RODRIGUEZ: We were just creating a forum but it was clearly, when you create a forum and call it a roundtable, like the knights of the roundtable, there's supposed to be equanimity there. But you add a funder to the roundtable then all of a sudden, it's not a balanced roundtable any more, and I think that that had a lot to do with it. I think that perhaps if it had been someone who was known within these circles of women that called the roundtable, that might have been different, obviously. But I was coming from a grassroots social justice movement from the Lower East Side, New York City-based, not nationally known as a leader in the reproductive rights movement. So I knew that there was question about who I was or what my intention was or my role here was. Clearly, my role was as representing the Latina Roundtable and how I had been charged to create programs out of the policies and the policy papers and the legislative work that the Latina Roundtable had been doing. This, to me, was a perfect program to create a real Latina Roundtable for there to be real, tangible solutions to be implemented. So, what I did was that I opened the meeting with the goose story to introduce myself and what was my aspiration for this project. And so, do you want me to read it?

FOLLET: Yes, definitely.

24:12

RODRIGUEZ: So, I proceeded to say that, "Next fall, when you see geese heading south for the winter, flying along in V formation, you might consider what science has discovered as to why they fly that way. As each bird flaps his wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in V formation, the whole flock adds at least 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own. People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going more quickly and easily because they are traveling on the thrust of one another. When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front. If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who care, headed the same way we are. When the head goose gets tired, it rotates back in the wing and another goose flies point. It is sensible to take turns doing demanding jobs, with people or with geese flying south. Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. What do we say when we honk from behind? Finally, and this is most important, when a goose gets sick or is wounded by gunshots and falls out of formation, two geese fall out with that goose and follow it down to lend help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it is able to fly or until it dies. Only then do they launch out on their own or with another formation to catch up with

their group. If we have the sense of a goose, we will stand by each other like that.”

FOLLET: That’s quite a vision.

RODRIGUEZ: It is quite a vision. Mm-hmm.

FOLLET: Do you recall the response at the time?

RODRIGUEZ: Mm-hmm. As Chino would say, it neutralized things.

FOLLET: Really?

RODRIGUEZ: It just neutralized things. It just made sense. I think people looked around the table and they saw an opportunity rather than, you know — it was just something to neutralize the skepticism and the air of resistance or any air of cautiousness. It just neutralized the energy there and everyone saw that there was a real opportunity here, I think, magically that happened. And then, my beautiful, brilliant college interns and I had to think of an ice breaker for the meeting. We had come up with going around the table and asking everyone when their last Pap smear was. So after I made nice-nice with the goose story, (laughs) I got down to business to see who of us are really walking the talk. It wasn’t to confront anyone but it was just to really open up some real discussion about, if we are all women here representing women’s health, how are we taking care of our own health? We’re women, don’t you know, and we all have uteruses and we just have to just check, when was our last Pap smear? And again, that opened up a whole other energy.

FOLLET: What was the energy? Describe it.

29:00

RODRIGUEZ: It just again, it broke down egos and airs that we walk into meetings with, because all of a sudden, we had to think of our own uteruses (laughs) and when was the last time we had a Pap smear. We laughed about it. We got serious about it. (laughs) Everyone had different reactions to the question. I can’t remember exactly, it was many years ago.

FOLLET: Do you think as a group, were these women who were likely to have participated in cervical self-exams?

RODRIGUEZ: Maybe some from, who were coming of age in the ’60s. But my generation, we came up like right after that. So, we read about it in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (laughs) or would see it in a PBS documentary or something, but it wasn’t something that we were exposed to. We were just exposed to much more conscious women that had gone through the consciousness-raising movement and were role modeling for us as

conscious women, at least introducing us to Planned Parenthood (laughs) and creating conditions for us to talk about sexuality and contraceptives and things like that in a relaxed and positive fashion. My peers were not mirroring their uterus. However, on the agenda was something I had forgotten, and one of the participants later, years later, reminded me of it, that there was a trip we made to a reproductive health clinic, where everyone got to see a woman's uterus. I said, Did I think of that? That must have been my interns. (laughs)

FOLLET: As a group you did this?

RODRIGUEZ: As a group trip and as part of the first symposium. It's funny when you think back at stuff you've done, like whatever possessed me to do that. I could blame it on the younger interns. They were just bolder than I was. But at the same time, I think that what I was trying to convey was the importance of getting out of the intellectual, theoretical concepts of women's health and getting really down to your own body and whether or not we were taking care of our own bodies the same way we wanted our women to do. And whether or not we were really that comfortable about talking about a uterus if we were expecting our constituency and our women, if we were telling them that it was OK to talk about it, so how OK was it really for us if it was about our uterus. It allowed for reflection as to our work and how it was being received by our own women.

FOLLET: Was Self-Help part of the general vocabulary that the women around this table shared at that point?

32:37

RODRIGUEZ: Well, some women had been exposed to Self-Help and had been using it in their work, while others weren't. We were convening a diverse community of women: urban, rural, different cultures, different regions in the country. So, it didn't take that much time to start identifying some common ground. But at that point, we didn't know all that much about each individual history that was at the table. It wasn't as important as identifying what common issues could be identified and move forward, what could we work together on to move forward, and using reproductive tract infections as a starting point and opening up discussions around how we address that or what needed to be addressed as well.

FOLLET: So how did that first roundtable — what did you end up with out of that, would you say? It started with skepticism and naysayers.

RODRIGUEZ: Regardless of how different we were, in terms of where we were working and where we were coming from and what our ethnic background was, we were all facing the same struggles of lack of funding, lack of resources, alienation, inadequate technology to do the work, no national coalition of any sort to support the work, insufficient

ability to mobilize and galvanize sufficient numbers of women to have our voice be heard up on Capitol Hill, where the decisions were really being made. We weren't represented at those levels either, that there was no representation at those levels either, but usually there's a pathway of information that goes to our representatives. Not only did we not have any representatives voicing our concerns, there wasn't even a channel to communicate our concerns to whoever was there.

So, you know, a lot of issues came up around the need to mobilize, around the need to look at lessons learned, at past attempts of mobilizing women of color around reproductive rights and utilize those lessons learned and really try again. It was very inspiring because people were already ready to just start. They were galvanized to start working together and that this had global potential, and it was very exciting from the arena that this was it. You know, what started out on a blank, scrap piece of paper, you know, 16 circles, was possibly the birth of a real woman of color movement.

But then again, that was just the first meeting. You know, the work still needed to be done. There's the element of inspiration and sense of empowerment when we get together. But then it gets down to the nitty-gritty work. Reena advised us that there was the potential that she was going to dedicate — she was so inspired by what happened in that meeting that she was willing to consider dedicating her entire docket for the next three years to funding a collective of 16 organizations that would work together, and we had to come up with how that would work.

FOLLET: What were the pros and cons of that approach of Reena's?

38:00

RODRIGUEZ: The pros were that there indeed was a real potential to make a tremendous impact in the grassroots that would impact the national level in the policy arena as well as the public arena. The pros were that organizations in the African American, Asian American, Latina and Native American communities that would never have been afforded an opportunity to get funding from Ford Foundation were going to get funding. The same pros ignited the cons because organizations that never would have gotten funding from Ford were going to get funding created a tremendous amount of criticism and also anger among some who felt that this was going to just cut their opportunity for funding for three years, which was very justifiable. But all those that criticized that were all invited to the meetings. There was still openness to who could be part of this.

FOLLET: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: Until it was finally identified by the end of the second meeting by those that were there from Ford that those who survived the process or who sustained in the process were going to be the first 16 that were going to be invited to submit proposals, although it was going to be one grant.

Each of the 16 were going to have to present proposals of how they would use their grant for capacity building for the next three years.

Now, the other element to this was that what we had strategized was that each of the four organizations within each mini-community was representing different levels of capacity, from a developed organization to an underdeveloped, you know, an emerging organization. There was this sense of possibility that by having diverse levels of capacity within the mini-community, that there would be a sharing of organizational information to support each other in that development. Everyone's development for the next three years looked different, depending on where they were in their organizational development.

We saw that each mini-community would then be in charge of a specific piece of capacity building that would be shared with all of them, like one would be in charge of technology, the other one documentation, and so on and so forth. So, we gave some real direction for the collective to work on with respect to organizational capacity building that had nothing to do with reproductive rights or reproductive tract infections. The grant was to strengthen the organizational capacity to do the work that they were doing, and that there were specific objectives for that collective to work on within the next three years.

FOLLET: So between the first meeting in New York and I assume out of that meeting came a delegation to go to Manila? Is that right?

42:55

RODRIGUEZ: Right, and then that delegation reported back at the second meeting.

FOLLET: At the second meeting in Savannah. Now, what's the time span between New York and Savannah or between the phone call from Reena to you and Savannah? Is it two months or two years? Roughly.

RODRIGUEZ: Roughly, from early '97 to late '98, so it was like a year and a half, I would say.

FOLLET: So by the time of Savannah in '98, there are 16 organizations who have agreed to this kind of collective structure with the four mini-communities and each community having an area of expertise?

RODRIGUEZ: We were all agreeing on everything until one of the Ford representatives that was there was giving us some guidance around what could be in the proposal and what couldn't, and she said, "Just make sure that you're not requesting for any equipment in this grant." I stood up and said, "Well, that's not acceptable," and everyone looked at me like, Luz, what are you doing? We've almost got this down here, let's agree. (laughs) No, that's not acceptable. And so there was this deadly silence and I'm like, We just figured out how everyone had to work together and share all these resources and information across the country and how this was going to build the organizational capacity of emerging grassroots organizations that didn't have fax machines, that didn't have computer

and email, let alone the equipment they needed to do this, to do what we just finished doing. How are you going to do that without technology, for godsakes? I knew that some organizations there really needed fax machines. We hardly use them now, but then fax machines were as valuable as email.

FOLLET: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: It turned out that — she said that she would get back to us on that, that she would look into it. And when she went back to Ford about that and they looked up where was this restriction on the books, they couldn't find it anywhere. It was sort of something that — it was an urban myth at Ford. (laughter)

FOLLET: So you were allowed to request basic equipment.

RODRIGUEZ: We were not only allowed to request equipment on this grant, but any capacity building grant given by Ford from then on was allowed to. So, to us, we feel that before we even got the grant, SisterSong was making groundbreaking impact on the manner in which foundations funded grassroots movements and social change. We saw the impact of doing something collectively that we could have never have done individually.

FOLLET: Now, what was your role going to be in this organization? How does your course follow the SisterSong course from this point on? The grant would come through, when — '98, right? The actual grant came through in '98, I think.

47:00

RODRIGUEZ: Please don't ask me dates. I'm so bad with dates.

FOLLET: OK, it's not important.

RODRIGUEZ: I'm not good with dates and years. It's all a big mush. I can't tell you the years of when things happen.

FOLLET: That's all right. It doesn't matter. That's why you've got the documents.

RODRIGUEZ: I can tell you what happened between the time that we were told to submit proposals. Usually they give you what, three weeks. Once they decide that they're inviting you to send a proposal, you don't have much time. I'll tell you one thing that happened is that the Native American women, who were among the emerging nonprofits, or the underresourced nonprofits, came to me and said, You've got to tell us what this proposal business is and what's an RFP and all this language that all of you have been talking about. We are not familiar with this language. We are not familiar with what in the world is in a proposal and what's a 501(c)3.

And we realized that there was work to be done just to get the proposal in for some of the real grassroots organizations we had invited. We worked together. I sat down with [Barbara] Skytears and Alice [Skenadore] and others to break down our language, and they also helped us understand their language, like when you're silent in a meeting, it doesn't mean we don't have anything to say. Sometimes we want time to think about what it is we're going to say and then you people just go off to something else and we never got to say what we wanted to say because now you're on to something else.

There were a lot of lessons learned in the actual doing of all this. I taught them what the framework of proposal writing was and how one presents a vision in a narrative, and just the components of a proposal. We went over language and what we mean by, you know, in-kind support and RFP and all this nonsense. You don't realize how much jargon you use and how you really must be very sensitive to the institutional cultures we create and the language we create within that culture, and the protocols, especially if you want to do inter-exchange of different types of groups.

One of my proudest achievements of those first three years was that Alice Skenadore of Wise Women Gathering Place, who was our midwife rep, who had been doing work around midwifery, educated us so much on the restrictive laws and legislation on practicing midwifery. She not only was a midwife but she taught other women how to be midwives in the rural Wisconsin region. She didn't have her 501(c)3, didn't know what a proposal was, and one of the goals of her capacity building was to get her 501(c)3. She did so and she didn't stop. She just was unstoppable after that and got all sorts of private and government funding, and her organization grew and today is just an amazing, amazing organization. They have their own shop. They, you know, are just — they've developed an entire curriculum and work with the school system up there. Wise Women Gathering Place is a shining example of the potential we saw in this.

What happened to me was, throughout all this, I was the executive director of the Latina Roundtable. Back at the ranch, there wasn't such enthusiasm around this whole SisterSong vision and practice. Between the board of directors — or some on the board of directors, not all — and myself, there was this real difference. We had professional differences in the direction that I was going with this whole SisterSong thing, and how I was perhaps spending too much time on this SisterSong thing and not enough time and attention at home base.

There were other issues that came up around going after some funding that I just really didn't feel comfortable going after because that particular — well, it was Wilma Montanez, who was my predecessor at Latina Roundtable, was now program officer at Jessie Smith Noyes, which was a continuing supporter of Latina Roundtable from before Wilma was there. Funders had approached me and called me to say that Wilma was really speaking against this whole SisterSong project and saying that I was really not qualified to lead such an initiative, and that

52:10

Ford was making this huge mistake. Now, she had a right to her opinion but this was really heartbreaking for me because I had such admiration and respect for one of our reproductive rights leaders in the Latina community. I was honored to be her successor and here I was being criticized by her publicly among funders, and I had shared this with the board and they wanted to know why I wasn't going back to Jessie Smith Noyes for a grant. I was just like, you can't ask me to go there and ask her for money after she's just totally –

FOLLET: Put you down.

RODRIGUEZ: – put me down among funders and stuff. This would be a hard pill for me. Why don't one of you go and deal with Jessie Smith Noyes or allow me to raise double the amount from somewhere else? It went to a vote and the majority of the board did not feel comfortable with that. They felt that this was insubordination. I was floored. I was dumbfounded. I had just been part of initiating a four-million-dollar national project which Latina Roundtable was leading, and we were arguing over a few thousand dollars and a matter of principle and a request for support.

FOLLET: Was Latina Roundtable one of the 16?

55:50

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. So I left, I resigned. I resigned just out of principle and was invited to help one of the emerging Latina organizations that was part of the 16, which was Casa Atabex. So I went and was their first executive director and helped them get their space and their furniture, and help get their bookkeeping system and their financial management systems in place and really utilized that Ford grant to establish them as a formal, nonprofit organization, which was their next developmental stage, because they were an organized group in the community doing tremendous health education and alternative health in the Mott Haven community in the Bronx, which was really great.

Things were not easy. When you get down to the ground and actually start doing this work, it's not easy, first of all, keeping in touch with other organizations and keeping that common ground, you know, inspirational and tangible work that needs to be done when you're really working on the day-to-day, trying to get organizational work done from day to day. Grassroots means that you're working with the roots right there at home, and most of these organizations didn't have the capacity yet and didn't really have the support that they needed, which — in our ideal design, they were supposed to be supporting each other. Those that were most sophisticated needed to be helping those that were emerging. You're flashing.

FOLLET: OK. So let's put in a new tape.

58:36

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

- FOLLET: These are the sketches and the notes from the meetings.
- RODRIGUEZ: The Casa Atabex proposal that I wrote for them.
- FOLLET: You've kept all this stuff. That's so fabulous. So all the concept papers that you're talking about and the meetings that you're talking about, we have the audio recordings and the interns' notes.
- RODRIGUEZ: Oh, that's why I want copies. I think they'd be fascinating for us now after all these years to sit and look at those meetings, the videos of those meetings.
- FOLLET: Yes. What did we think we were doing? So the Casa Atabex, how long were you there?
- RODRIGUEZ: A year.
- FOLLET: Just a year?
- RODRIGUEZ: As far as I recall. I really don't know what I want to say about Casa Atabex. It's like a real weirdness to it.
- FOLLET: A real what?
- RODRIGUEZ: A weirdness.
- FOLLET: A weirdness?
- RODRIGUEZ: Yes, to that whole experience, which I still have — I'm challenged in verbalizing and explaining what it was that happened. There's a certain sense of idealism that we work with that is very powerful and helps us achieve a tremendous amount of accomplishments on the way. However, we're still just human beings with our own egos, with our own agendas and our own limitations to truly working with different individuals. So sometimes we are working with tremendous contradictions as human beings.
- FOLLET: So what were the circumstances that were complicated at Casa Atabex?
- RODRIGUEZ: Well the thing is, at Casa Atabex again, there was professional differences about how we were to move forward and an inability to work together because our ethics and our principles were so different. But here we were, the Latina mini-community, or the mini-mini-community. You know, there was a mini-community of Latina women who couldn't work together and here I was being part of this design of bringing all these diverse communities of women to work together,

2:20

which was working, for the most part. Yet there was influx within the women that apparently or superficially were supposed to have commonality and working together.

FOLLET: Do you mean within Casa Atabex?

RODRIGUEZ: Within the organization, yes.

FOLLET: Or do you mean between Casa Atabex and the other Latina –

RODRIGUEZ: No, within Casa Atabex, the same way that happened within Latina Roundtable. While the design was for diverse communities of women to work together despite or while respecting their differences, that was not occurring within the specific organizations that I was working in. Somehow maybe, being the architect of SisterSong worked against me within the organizations I was working in. It seemed like SisterSong was too heavy for them, too much of a distraction for me to be at the helm of their organization.

FOLLET: And how did that present itself in Casa Atabex?

RODRIGUEZ: It presented itself in Casa Atabex — I could tell you a few of the factors and I know that it was more than one factor. I'm sure as many women that were involved, that's how many valid stories there were to what happened. So all I could say was my experience of it. My experience of it was that I recall it was not well received when I had to report how many meetings I was either at or going to be at with respect to the trainings and conferences that the SisterSong project was responsible for. There was a real appreciation for what I had contributed to Casa Atabex and a real sense of welcoming and healing when I first started, but not so much appreciation for when I wasn't there. SisterSong took me away a lot and SisterSong was specifically for certain benchmarks and required activity, and Casa Atabex's mission was more expansive than that, and there wasn't all that much funding for the other things that were very important to the leadership in Casa Atabex.

5:25

FOLLET: There was no administrative position for SisterSong? You were expected to do both. You were running Casa Atabex and volunteering time to SisterSong? Is there a structural –

RODRIGUEZ: No. The money was there. It wasn't like I was volunteering. The money was there for our participation in the collective. Casa Atabex got substantial grant monies to be the anchor organization in the Latina mini-community. Each mini-community had one organization identified as the anchor that got more substantive granting because part of that granting, part of that money, was to be devoted to sustaining a certain role in the collective, be it technology or documentation of the entire project.

FOLLET: So it was understood that part of your time would be –

RODRIGUEZ: Oh, absolutely, by one individual, [Haydee Morales], who had been part of the SisterSong meetings. But when you look at an organizational structure, no matter how modest or new it is, you have a body of people in the board of directors. Your leadership doesn't always agree or have the same understanding of what we just took on. So, at many times, [Morales] and I were a voice in the wilderness, because there were other priorities for Casa Atabex and money was not such a seductive element to Casa Atabex. It wasn't. It was healing of our women and it was healing of our women in the way Casa Atabex wanted to do it. Yes, it's nice that we're getting desks and it's nice that we're getting financial management systems in place and it's nice we got a bookkeeper. You know, capacity building, as I saw it, was crucial and essential to an emerging organization.

8:40

But the leadership, the visionaries, don't always see it that way. The visionaries have their eye on the vision and the work that needs to be done in the community and don't always prioritize or value the infrastructure issues that are essential for sustaining those programs. And so I don't think that the conflicts or the differences we had at Casa Atabex were unique in any way. I think that it's representative of the struggles of nonprofit, community-based organizations, where you have visionaries and activists and organizers who know absolutely what has to be done to meet certain needs for their constituency or their community and are told, Well, in order to get resources, you have to be incorporated, you have to have your tax exemption now. That means you have to have financial management systems to show that you know how to manage money in order to be eligible for a grant and so on and so forth.

What happens in the nonprofit sector and often in my life was that I, the visionary, was thrown back to the back office to do all the god-awful, bureaucratic paperwork and the infrastructure work, while everybody else got to do the visionary work. Then, I was to then try and convince the visionaries of the importance of the infrastructure work — not always achievable, you see, and in my experience, always a physical drain on me, where I always ended up getting ill physically. Like, for some reason I would internalize that conflict and get sick, really get sick. You hear about burnout in the nonprofit sector. I've lived it. There's a real tangible process that occurs when you ultimately burn out and you are internalizing contradictions because you're a visionary, you're an idealist, you're an altruist if you're in this work.

FOLLET: You have a goose-story vision, right?

12:40

RODRIGUEZ: Right. You have a goose-story vision.

FOLLET: You brought that to the group.

RODRIGUEZ: Exactly. And then what happens is, is that when you get down to the nitty-gritty, day-to-day work, there are constant contradictions, which is not unlike everyday life. We're constantly dealing with contradictions in our lives. But as a visionary, nonprofit leader — servant-leader, as I regarded myself — I would internalize these conflicts because it just didn't jive with my vision of what the work was supposed to be. And I'd stayed away from the corporate sector because I thought that that's where it was a dog-eat-dog world. But there was a dog-eat-dog element to governance of these organizations as well — which, frankly, I didn't know how to deal with at the time, and frankly, did not expect to have to deal with it, and frankly, was so heartbroken and distraught that it was coming from women that I considered sisters, that I loved, that I admired — didn't know how to deal with that, either. And it was manifesting in chronic fatigue and irritable bowel syndrome, combined with migraine headaches and arthritis flare-ups, to mention a few. So there were days where all of that was happening at the same time and I literally could not get out of bed. Sometimes I couldn't get out of bed to get to the doctor. I was that sick.

FOLLET: And this, as you understand it now, is a result of the incompatibility between being both a visionary yourself and a nitty-gritty executive director person who understood the need for 501(c)3s and faxes, et cetera.

RODRIGUEZ: Infrastructure, yes.

FOLLET: Is that an internal contradiction to you? Is it a contradiction between your role then and pressures that other people were putting on you?

15:05

RODRIGUEZ: I haven't figured it all out yet. I haven't. In retrospect — you know how they say retrospect is 20/20 vision? But still, I think that retrospect is 20/20 vision when you've had a sufficient amount of time to figure it out. I've got a lot of it figured out. Some of it does have to do with this contradiction or difference in the type of work that you do as a programmatic visionary and a nonprofit administrator. You're not prepared. I did not go to any type of training to create infrastructures. It was all by trial and error and mentorship that I learned proposal writing and nonprofit administration. It was by observing really good people that did that really well.

FOLLET: You mentioned last night, when we were talking about these kinds of issues just over dinner, your notion about being on the bridge, someone staying on the bridge. Does that pertain to this?

RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely.

FOLLET: Can you explain what you mean by that and what it is. First, explain what I'm talking about.

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I talk about being on the bridge, using the analogy of *Star Trek*, where the captain, be it Captain Picard or Captain Kirk or Captain Janeway — as I'm often reminded in my classrooms — when I teach fundraising, when I teach at the Foundation Center, I see an audience of new and emerging nonprofit visionaries coming to me to find out how to get grants or how to start a nonprofit. Although I don't have it completely figured out in terms of, you know, how I got ill and all of that, I use that as a lesson learned for them and I beseech them to take this as a lesson learned, that we're all visionaries that come to this work, but to get funding, you will have to have a formal infrastructure to manage that funding and that if you do not know that ahead of time, what will happen is you, the visionary, will end up in the back office doing all of the reporting and the grant writing and the bookkeeping and all of that while your volunteers or your staff do the visionary work.

So at least ahead of time, if you know this ahead of time and take it as a lesson learned, you can strategize whether you will be in the back office doing the administrative work or are you going to identify someone to do that for you, so that you are doing the visionary work. And I use the analogy of *Star Trek*. I say, Listen, Captain — I say Captain Picard because I got a crush on Captain Picard — Captain Picard was always on the bridge and he would send out his team to other planets and the missions. Those are our projects. That's the visionary work that we do. But he never left the bridge and if he did, he always would leave Mr. Spock on the bridge. And we need to look at the fact that our operations, within our nonprofits, our administrative core is just as important as the bridge on *Star Trek*. That without putting as much attention to having a bookkeeper and a secretary and like any other business that has to have its administrative core, that those projects will not be sustained for very long. What we're at looking is long-term viability. All of our issues and problems have taken many, many years to manifest and have been around for many years. It's not going to happen overnight, and funders need to understand that as well, that it's not going to happen in a three-year grant, that these are long-term solutions that we must develop and sustain those services to our people. We have to have someone coming in to our team that can help us with the administrative infrastructure issues to sustain our organizations so that our projects could be sustained.

I have always been one that has been identified as someone that can help with that, that can help organizations through their transitions, that can help organizations get their administrative operations in order, or their strategic planning in order for those projects to be sustained, which of course includes fundraising, which of course includes what the funders are looking for. They're looking for viable nonprofits to invest in. Or they absolutely would have an open mind to a long-term funding

strategy if in fact we could show that we could sustain it administratively as well.

FOLLET: But it wasn't possible to both sustain Casa Atabex and help SisterSong emerge. Where were your energies? How was this tangled up in your future with these organizations?

21:15

RODRIGUEZ: I don't think that it was possible for me to sustain the role that Casa Atabex had for me and the expectations that they had for me, and I felt really bad about it. I suppose I internalized it and again, was manifesting it in one of my physical symptoms as well. Where was my focus? It was SisterSong. I felt that I did a tremendous amount of work at Casa Atabex but it wasn't appreciated because I wasn't doing all of the other work that they wanted, and they truly were a collective. So, being an executive director didn't excuse you from being part of the weekend programs and weekend events and everything else that was going on. And I appreciate that. However, I couldn't sustain that myself as an individual. I couldn't sustain it. And physically, my body was totally rebelling. I just couldn't sustain anything at one point and just crashed, and was literally physically unable to do anything for a good solid three weeks.

I thought that — you know how you get a really bad flu and you're out for two weeks if it's really, really bad? So I thought that at the end of two weeks I could get back, and so did everybody else at Casa Atabex. But I was warned by my physician at the time that I needed another week and that I was taking a real risk if I went back to work right now, and that I had to make a choice. It was either my (laughs) — and it was true. I called and said I really needed another week, and that was not acceptable at Casa Atabex. It was not acceptable. You know, the house of women's healing could not accept that I needed to be away for another week of healing.

And I, in no way, expected to be terminated in the manner in which I was. I did expect that our relationship wasn't going to last and I was very much preparing to meet with the leadership at Casa Atabex and discuss a transition, for the benefit of Casa Atabex primarily, because of everything I was handling in terms of its administrative work. I needed another week and we could talk about a smooth transition to have me leave without it jeopardizing the organization, you know, that we could strategize a transition there for me to not be there any longer.

I didn't get the opportunity to have that meeting. I wish I would have been a fly on the wall at Casa Atabex to see, with all of their brilliant knowledge in women's healing and Self-Help and women's rights, how they came to the conclusion and decision to just pack everything that belonged to me in one cardboard box and drive it all the way to New Jersey, and while I was at the doctors, just leave it in the middle of my living room for my children to stand there wondering what the hell is going on. And for me to come home from the doctor, who just told me I need another week and find my son standing over a box of my

possessions and asking me if I was fired. And the same way you're just looking at me, dumbfounded and speechless, that's how I stayed, I suppose, for a few days. I was just dumbfounded and speechless, and realized that what this meant, besides the fact that I was unemployed, more significantly what it meant was that I was no longer part of SisterSong.

27:00

FOLLET: Because?

RODRIGUEZ: Because at that time, SisterSong was not a membership organization, [it] was a project of the Ford Foundation that included 16 organizations. I was going to be part of developing this collective as part of one of those organizations. So I was an individual, no longer part of that organization. I no longer had a role in SisterSong, as everyone else was now getting the grants that I helped acquire for the collective. I saw it as a very uncanny, interesting, defining moment in my life. I just felt that this was happening for a reason and all of those wisdoms that you kind of pull out of the air when you can't make sense of your life. (laughs) It's like, this is all happening for a reason or how interesting, you know, that the creator has chosen to first of all, give me the opportunity to make the most significant contribution to reproductive rights, that this was the pinnacle of my success as a visionary, I think, at that time in my life. I would always have these great ideas and I'm like, Wow, that's a great idea, Luz, *pssssh* (dismissive noise). And all of a sudden someone else said Wow, that's a great idea, Luz, here's four million, and let's try it out.

Then the creator saw fit to say, OK, Luz, whoops, you're off to do something else right now, and I'm like, Well, wait a minute, (laughs) I'm not going to be there to see that manifest. It was a test of my personal, I'd say, integrity, but not in the way we usually say integrity. It was just like when you see a piece of furniture, like how much integrity does it have, like how long will it stay solid — that kind of integrity. Am I going to stay solid amidst a situation where something that I valued most in the world right now is just going to be taken away.

I made it. I mean, it was OK. Actually, I was very proud of the fact that SisterSong went on and kept its integrity despite the flaws of the structure. Despite the, I would imagine, the conflicts in principles and approaches, whatever issues they encountered in having to make it through those three years as a collective, which I'm sure were many. They also kept the integrity of the power of the collective of women of color and maintained the integrity and the principles of unity, that despite all of the negativity or the challenges or the obstacles that they absolutely had to encounter, that there was an integrity that was maintained throughout, which was this principle of unity, which was, we're going to make it this time as a unified force. That's the most important thing. They never lost their eye on that prize, on the priority of SisterSong.

What happened was that SisterSong took a life of its own, which was bigger than any one organization or individual. And so, even though it looked like I was going through this tremendous crisis in my life, at the same time I was so proud that SisterSong was going to live on, that it didn't need me. It didn't need anybody there as an individual. What it needed was the individual contributions that people were making and the mutual respect among everything. It was just, there was this mutual respect that maintained its integrity and survived every possible odd. Against all odds, SisterSong survived and was an inspiration to me to survive.

FOLLET: Before we follow that SisterSong story through, let's pick up the thread of your story that we've managed not to yet, and that is the fact that you were supporting a family at this time, at this point. You mentioned your son, your children finding the box. At what point did you start having a family? Let's pick up that piece of your life.

32:30

RODRIGUEZ: I had my first son, my prodigal son, Abran, in 1981, my senior year of college at NYU. He was at my graduation actually. (laughs) My college counselor was saying, Oh, you're going to be another statistic. Puerto Rican woman gets pregnant, doesn't graduate college. I'm like, Just you see, I'll be right back. I've just got to get this belly out of the way. I'll be right back, I promise. And sure enough, I was pregnant during spring semester, took the summer off and was back in the fall, and walked the next June, I suppose, for graduation at Washington Square Park. And Abran was there with my mom. By then, I was no longer with his dad and was raising him on my own.

I fell in love and got married shortly thereafter to Norberto Cruz, who had a young son, Norberto Cruz, Jr., who was a year older than Abran. And so, consequently, we raised them as brothers. I got a young family of two boys to raise and had a child with Norberto, and it was another boy. (laughs) So then I got Gabriel. In '86 we had Gabriel, who we affectionately call Gabby. So I was raising three boys, doing women's work and raising a house of testosterone when I got home. (laughs)

FOLLET: That's a challenge.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. Abran, Norberto and Gabriel were my three boys. Soon thereafter, when I had Gabby, I was still at Henry Street Settlement. When I graduated college and found that I couldn't be certified as a dance therapist, I went back to the life that I knew all along, which was my community service work, and had summer counselor jobs at Henry Street and was hired as a youth counselor, and by then had been promoted to youth director. I led a youth employment program at Henry Street Settlement and had Gabriel.

In the youth employment program that I was leading, I was able to get this grant to do outreach to homeless youth. Because at that time,

there were a lot of families that were being put in these hotels in New York, burnt-out families, homeless families that were living under squalor and degradation in these horrible units in hotels. What we did is that we sent out outreach counselors to recruit and bring in homeless youth to integrate them into all of our youth programs that we had at Henry Street Settlement and get the older ones some job readiness skills and get them on to either their GED or their jobs or both.

During that outreach, I got acquainted with foster care children or children that were about to go into the foster care system. I was particularly concerned by one who was clearly a little bookworm. She was always reading and she always was trying to do the work we were doing and helping out. I had hired her to pick up Abran and Gabriel from school and take care of them after three o'clock, while I continued doing my proposals and my administrative work. Judy became part of the family. She just became part of the fabric of my family with the boys.

And by then, my marriage was coming to an end and things were really, really hard with the fact that I had raised Norberto, Jr. as my son and because of the way the marriage ended, I had no right to partial custody or even visitation rights because he was not my blood child. My husband was very resentful of the fact that the marriage was ending and was isolating me completely and making it impossible for me to see Norberto. So it was a very difficult time for me. I had lost my father that year, the year of the divorce, and lost my son. Judy was always there, kind of you know, my little pillar of strength, at least helping me keep things together with the work I was doing at Henry Street Settlement and you know, keeping my boys OK until I was able to give them attention after work. She was going into a group home from the — her family was being pulled apart and she was going into a group home.

One thing led to the other, but Judy became my foster child and she became my foster daughter at 13. At first, we had her only for weekends, but it took me nine months just to get security clearance with the foster care system for me to have visitation rights with Judy on weekends. So we joked that since it took nine months, I birthed Judy at 13 and she was ours, regardless of what they said.

FOLLET: Nice, nice, nice.

RODRIGUEZ: Eventually, things were reconciled between my ex-husband and myself and I was able to get visitation rights with Norberto. So I had Norberto and Judy coming over on weekends and Abran and Gabby all the time. Weekends were pretty full, full of love and family and we had a very unique family that some people really loved and supported and helped me keep us intact. We have an extended family of what we call fairy godmothers and fairy godfathers. You know, my close friends have played surrogate, parental roles with my children and have helped us stay intact while I ran off to save the world (laughs) in the various different fronts that I have been participating in, in terms of social

41:05

justice. I felt that although it was indeed a sacrifice to my children that I was away a lot or that I was taking on more than my share of parenting (laughs) [but] that they would be better off for it, that somehow I was modeling for them something positive and significant and that it was worth the sacrifices. I was later contacted by — do you remember my Uncle Oscar?

FOLLET: Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: He and his wife, Tessie, were raising their grandchild, Tanya, because my cousin was not doing well in her life and had a child at an early age, and was struggling with addiction and other challenges in her life. So, Uncle Oscar and Aunt Tessie were raising Tanya from infancy. Uncle Oscar had passed away the same year my father passed away. That was a rough year. If you think about that year, the divorce, losing Norberto, my father died but two months prior to that, Uncle Oscar had died, and Jim Robinson, who was the head of the youth development department at Henry Street Settlement, who had seen me growing up as a youth in the Lower East Side and was very instrumental in giving me more leadership roles in Henry Street Settlement. The people that would have been my surrogate fathers, which would have been Jim Robinson and Uncle Oscar, both died before my father died and on the same year of my divorce and not having contact with my son. So that was a rough year. Talk about burnout.

That's why I hesitate to tell you what all the factors were in me burning out at certain points in my life because it was a myriad of factors. You can't just pinpoint it and blame it on nonprofit administration or professional conflicts. You know, there was a lot going on in my personal life which contributed to not being able to sustain work beyond a certain point.

FOLLET: I remember when you were talking about the Dominican Women's Development Center. You described that as an environment, as a culture that was supportive, that was –

RODRIGUEZ: Very healing for someone that had burnt out recently prior to that.

FOLLET: – very healing, but you haven't mentioned that again about other work contexts. It sounds as if you weren't in that kind of a place again.

RODRIGUEZ: I think the Dominican Women's Development Center was the most healing work experience during that time in my life, where I could work after being burnt out. They had a very unique way of incorporating self-nurturance, Self-Help, mutual nurturance of each other as women while doing very, very difficult work.

45:45

FOLLET: Has Self-Help been an important part of your political work?

- RODRIGUEZ: Only in that it was finally introduced to me when I got involved in SisterSong.
- FOLLET: I see.
- RODRIGUEZ: Even though it was introduced to me and I think that it was integral in the healing process that I went through at Dominican Women's Development Center, it wasn't identified as Self-Help. When I was introduced to Self-Help, I can then say, Ah, that's what we were doing at Dominical Women's Development Center.
- FOLLET: I see what it was.
- RODRIGUEZ: Yes. Well, I want to talk about Tanya so we can get the whole kids' story. What happened was that after Uncle Oscar died, Tessie was diagnosed with severe diabetes and she didn't expect to live much longer either, and had a long talk with me about Tanya and that she had seen how I had been doing so well with being a single parent of four children. (laughs) Could you consider adding another one? (laughs) And I'm like, I don't want to discuss this. You never want to talk about someone's demise and passing on when they're still alive. So of course, I just said, Of course, not a question, just leave it in writing somewhere.
- [Then, as part of an international exchange program at Henry Street Settlement, I led a group of young people to Germany to visit young people in East Berlin just after the fall of the Berlin wall.] Shortly thereafter, I got a call that Aunt Tessie had died. And apparently she had left word that Tanya was to come with me. And so, I got Tanya. Luckily, Judy was just going off to college and you know, her daybed in the living room was now free for Tanya to occupy. (laughter)
- Ultimately our family grew, and if the kids were here, they would tell you it wasn't just five kids, because if any of our extended family had children that wanted to run away from home, they came to Mama Luz's house.
- FOLLET: Mama Luz.
- RODRIGUEZ: Yes. And there were neighborhood kids who felt more at home in our home than they did elsewhere. Our home was a haven for young people, and I'm Mama Luz to a lot more kids than just five. Even though now they're not kids any more, they're still my kids, but they're all beautiful young adults that have spread their wings and are doing fabulous things in their lives.
- FOLLET: And you have grandchildren living with you now, don't you?
- RODRIGUEZ: Yes, actually.
- FOLLET: What's your household now? Who's there right now?

50:05

RODRIGUEZ: Well Gabby's still home because he's the baby, even though he's 19 and taller than all of them. He's six feet tall, gorgeous. Tanya is still home and Abran had a son during his senior year. I remember when he told me he was going to have a child and I said, "While you're still at senior year at St. Johns, (laughs) with a Bill Gates Millennium Scholarship, you're going to have a kid senior year." He says, "Ma, you had me senior year." And I was like, Oh yes, that's right. (laughs) So the agreement was that his child would be at graduation the same way he was at my graduation. And sure enough, it was uncanny to go to St. Johns for Abran's graduation and have his three-month-old son at graduation the same way, the same age he was at my graduation.

FOLLET: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: Uncanny. Life happens in very uncanny ways. What brought me to that? We were talking about?

FOLLET: I was saying that you now have grandchildren living with you, right?

RODRIGUEZ: So that was Josyah, and he's the youngest of my grandchildren, because Judy has a daughter now and her name is Amber. Norberto had two children and he was the first to have two grandchildren. Essence is probably going to be eight soon, if she isn't already, and Jonathan, who is about five or six. And so, I have four grandchildren; Essence, Jonathan, Amber and Josyah. And since Abran lives with us right now, we have partial custody of Josyah and so Josyah lives with me as well, part of the week. He's two and it's wonderful, just wonderful. Abran is at Columbia University doing his graduate studies in peace education and is a Bill Gates Millennium Scholar. Tanya is an aspiring fashion designer. And Judy, after graduating from SUNY [State University of New York] New Paltz, she became a case worker for Child Protective Services. She's been, you know, a beacon of light for other foster kids, or would-be foster kids, since then. Gabriel is a very talented visual artist as well as a football star and has many talents, and is about to start college in the fall. They have been a tremendous source of strength and inspiration for me. They are awesome, awesome.

FOLLET: The word strength was just crossing my mind when you said that, and I'm wondering where you've gotten the strength to do this. And you do all this — the personal work, the political work, the sustenance of a family, and you mentioned at one point, a creator. I think it was when you were saying that the creator must have other plans for you right now. I think it was when you were forced to separate from SisterSong.

RODRIGUEZ: To walk away from SisterSong.

FOLLET: Yes. Was that a metaphor or is there a belief in the creator?

RODRIGUEZ: I feel that the creator is the ultimate — I answer to a higher authority with respect to what's my mission, what's my role in the movement. I answer to a higher authority. There's clearly a line of communication between me and my creator and I feel that I'm given missions if I so choose to accept, (laughs) such as, we need you to take Tanya right now or, you know, you need to make room for another child in your home. And I'm like, But, but, where's the money coming from? You know, I was just about to take a trip to Manila or something. How do I do this? I feel that I have an ultimate source of sustenance that allows me to do what for a minute seems impossible but it's put before me in such a way that clearly, it's a calling to arms or a calling to do something.

54:30

That's how I've approached many of the things I've done in my life. It's not just because I've gotten an idea, hey, I want a house full of kids right now. It's because it's put before me in a way that I know that it's coming from God, that this is the path that I need to take. Sometimes the path takes a detour because I thought I was going to stay on this path. I thought I was going to stay on the SisterSong path, and it detoured. And for a minute, I get like perplexed and then I'm like, OK, where else am I needed? I see myself as a servant-leader. I like that expression. When I heard that term, I identified with it because indeed, I have leadership qualities and attributes and skills that I can contribute as a leader, and have been identified as a community leader, but never losing the sense that I'm serving, that this is about community service and that it's about engendering leadership in others.

FOLLET: In terms of kind of formal belief systems, I think you said that you were brought up Presbyterian and you've passed through or been an Episcopalian.

RODRIGUEZ: You want to talk religion? (laughs)

FOLLET: And Hindu maybe. (Rodriguez laughs) I think you put those on your, you know, the little survey form before this –

RODRIGUEZ: That's the hardest box to fill in for me in an application, if it asks for religion, because it's been a journey for me. I was raised Presbyterian, went to Sunday school and Sunday services religiously (laughs) throughout my childhood, until I was I think about 12. Around age 18 or so, as I was growing into a young adult, I was very much attracted to and taken by Hinduism in the form of yoga and learning about the teachings of Swami Satchidananda, going to his talks and practicing yoga and living a yogic life, and I did that for many years. When I was pregnant with Abran in the '80s, I was very much a practicing yogi as much as I could be. You're flashing.

FOLLET: OK, thank you.
END TAPE 5

59:38

TAPE 6

RODRIGUEZ: That lasted for about seven years. And then I led a vegetarian life. I ate whole foods, did yoga and was dissuaded from that or distracted from that when I met my (laughs) former husband, Norberto Cruz, who loved steak. When we started dating, he treated me to this glorious, garlic-seared steak. (laughs) My yogic life was over. I don't know if it was the steak or the falling in love.

FOLLET: The combination.

RODRIGUEZ: The combination of the two totally distracted me from my yogic life, and it didn't last. I've always been on this journey. I think that what turned me off, frankly, to Hinduism during that period of time was when I started learning more about it and it being an institutionalized religion. When I started getting more exposed to the institutional end of it, the infrastructure that was behind it, I wasn't as inspired any more. I've had this skepticism about institutionalized religion and the more I learned about Christianity and its history, the less I felt an affinity to it, although the teachings of Jesus, my Christian roots, my skepticism have not affected my faith in Jesus and in his teachings, and my faith in God and the belief in a higher, a supreme being. However, beyond that there's this resistance and skepticism around being part of an organized religion.

Where Episcopalian comes in is simply that St. Mark's Church resides on Tenth Street and Second Avenue, around the corner from where I grew up on Ninth Street, and it was a church I never went to because we went to Fourteenth Street, to the Church of the Crossroads.

FOLLET: Presbyterian?

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, but just always passed St. Mark's. St. Mark's has this lawn that Elisa and I used to play in. And we would have all these adventures on their lawn, which turns out was a graveyard for Stuyvesant and other forefathers. During that year when my father died, my uncle Oscar died, I was divorced, I lost Norberto, couldn't see my stepson, I needed some sustenance, and I found that I was in such a difficult time in my life that it was just a spontaneous thing where I just walked into St. Mark's Church and found another place for healing and sustenance and nurturing. Despite the fact that it was an organized — it also has to do with the people that are within there and the people at St. Mark's Church, primarily from the congregation to the pastor, are all social justice activists.

FOLLET: Really?

RODRIGUEZ: Really. Working in hunger and homelessness issues, housing rights issues, HIV/AIDS education. And wouldn't you know it, that I felt

4:30

comfortable at St. Mark's Church. So, throughout the years, although I don't go every week, my children have fond memories and are very used to going Easter to St. Mark's Church, because we all get together whenever we can. That's been the church that my children have known and my way of, I suppose, instilling with them this understanding that there is a creator and that they need to have a relationship with him but that I'm not so trusting of organized religion, but St. Mark's Church is OK in my book, kind of thing.

FOLLET: Do you have, in your mind, a visual representation of a creator? How would you define –

RODRIGUEZ: Supreme being is something that is beyond our ability to imagine, because it's hard for us not to then embody it into a human form when we're trying to get an image of a supreme being. I think that it's beyond our capacity to imagine. So, it depends what day it is. It could be a woman one day, it could be, you know, this big face in a cloud. It's just beyond our capacity, I think, or my capacity. It's as if I'm communicating to an intelligence that's in another dimension, and that's why I'm very much still attracted to yoga and the manner in which you have to sort of quiet down all of the ways that we think and imagine, quiet down all of our chatter and preconceived notions of reality, to patiently, as in meditation, just patiently wait to make a connection. I don't bother trying to create an image. I think that the closest I have felt to that connection is when I meditate and quiet myself down to listen, as opposed to my Christian side. When I want to pray, I'm not listening, I'm like praying for stuff that I need or praying for something to happen or praying — well, what's the sense in praying if it's supposed to be like the will of God? So whatever it is you want, fine. So what do I have to pray for, you know what I'm saying? (laughs)

Praying is not listening, in our stereotypical perception of prayer. It doesn't make sense to me. You know, if it's really you're supposed to kind of go with the flow and the will of God, then it's about listening to where your path is and whether you're on your path throughout your journey. Not that I don't pray, but I always think that it's funny when I pray. Well, if it's OK with you, it would be really nice to get this done, if it's on my path, you know, (laughs) so what do you think? So, I have conversations with God and sometimes I have what I call — I love that term, the title of that play called *Your Arm is Too Short to Box with God*. Have you ever heard of that?

FOLLET: No.

9:28

RODRIGUEZ: It's a title of a play from my youth that was on Broadway but I never got to see it. But I never forgot the title. Titles have a defining effect on me, like *Your Arm is Too Short to Box with God*. So why pray for what you want when it's going to be God's will anyway, right? (laughter) So I have conversations with God. The other one is the title of a book,

which I haven't read, written by Patti LaBelle, and it's *Don't Block the Blessings: Revelations of a Lifetime*. That's so profound. I don't have to read the book, it's so profound. We need to learn how to just step out of the way of the blessings that are coming to us. Oftentimes, we're in the way, too busy chattering and praying (laughs) for what we want, when it's probably just really right there.

I know that it sounds kind of cliché-ish, but when I had to step away from SisterSong, not everybody was happy about that. It was really very emotional and hard for many, many people involved in the SisterSong movement, and for myself. But somehow, deep inside I knew that it would be OK, that for some reason it needed to occur and that SisterSong would be just fine, and that I would be just fine.

I actually just got another call to see whether or not I'd consider running this after-school program for a community of very poor children in the Peekskill area, up in the mountains, and it just seemed right to work with a bunch of kids after all this nonsense with adults I was having at work. It just seemed like another opportunity to heal while I worked, which was to work with kids. That's what I do at home. I mean, I'm Mama Luz, you know, and so they were looking for, at Partnership Ministries, someone to run their learning partners, which was an educational ministry that they had. They had this beautiful Victorian house that needed some upkeep but it was transformed into computer labs and tutoring rooms. There was an art room, and again, I was just like, Wow, this is amazing. What was put in front of me was a request to run a home with a bunch of kids and help them upgrade their reading levels. Piece o' cake, I could do that. And I'm getting paid for that? Yeah, okay.

FOLLET: OK, I can do that. You're also a writer. You have plays that you've written. You are a poet.

RODRIGUEZ: I've written plays, poetry, short stories. Actually, I have a running list of titles of books that I've yet to write. I've written volumes of journals and have always been the writer. That was what was instilled in me in my childhood, when I was exposed to the writers on the Lower East Side, from the Nuyorican Poets Café and Teatro Ambulante. I mean, people look back or they read about certain Puerto Rican writers and I get a kick out of it. I hung out with those guys and to me they were no big deal but they were a big deal in my life because they were influencing me to write and were role models for me as a young girl. I guess what they instilled in me was that you write, you write, you write, you just write. It doesn't matter if you're not published or you're not recognized as a writer. You still write and you write and you write and if it comes out in poetry form, if it's a play that needs to be written, it needs to be written.

13:10

Throughout this whole social justice work that I've been doing, and raising a family, I've always been compelled to continue writing and doing other creative work as well. I'm an aspiring sculptor that never

gets to sculpt because I don't have a studio and I don't have the time. But wherever I have an opportunity, like when I got the Windcall Fellowship and they said I had three weeks to do anything I wanted, and there was space and resources to do anything I wanted, including a complete art studio down the road, I just went totally into my sculpture mode and did like three or four sculptures during the three weeks that I was there. There's a picture of me with all my — you know, so proud of the sculptures that I had done and [I] was told by the Windcall family that hosted me that I really had a gift. And that really meant a lot to me, that if I had my druthers and was just doing sculpture, that I had a gift, that I could really do this. I did some when I was at Pratt and that's when I knew I had a gift. That's when I knew I had a gift, but just haven't had the time or the wherewithal to develop that gift.

It was easier to fit in the writing. I sculpt stories and I am constantly getting stories in my head that I would love to just get down. So what I do is that I get down titles and I get down the concepts or, you know, the framework of a story or a play. But there was one play in particular that had taken on a life of its own, because it had readings and different incarnations since the '80s.

FOLLET: Which one?

RODRIGUEZ: It's called *The Ghostwriter*. I wrote *The Ghostwriter* actually when Gabby was born, because when I was pregnant with Gabby I was in a car accident, and it was really serious. The car was practically totaled and I was in the front seat, and I was seven months pregnant with Gabby. As a result, Gabby had to be born prematurely through cesarean section because the seatbelt squeezed the amniotic fluid out with the impact and there wasn't any amniotic fluid sufficient for him to stay. The doctors tried to keep him in my uterus as long as possible, to delay the cesarean section. So there was this traumatic experience that I wrote about, actually, called *Seven Days to Life*, which was about those seven days of me having to be flat on my back, trying to keep the fluid from coming out and me feeling the fluid constantly coming out, and trying to survive and trying to help Gabby survive those seven days.

I wrote about it and that was published in a three-part series in a parenting newsletter that I wrote for. But when he was born, he was in an incubator in the neonatal unit and had to be incubated for at least a month, until he was of sufficient weight for me to take him home. I was being sent home and I didn't know how to stay sane at home, not being able to hold my baby. And the car being totaled as it was, it wasn't easy to drive me to go see my baby. It was really a very difficult time to get through and I used my writing to get through that and wrote about those seven days.

I often write as a consequence of a dream. I had a dream about an attic and I saw the details of the attic. Many of my plays, I either dream or think of the set design first and then I craft a story into that, and that's how *The Ghostwriter* was born. I dreamt of the set and the set being an

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attic, and it being a makeshift writer's studio with the desk being two stacks of books with a wood plank with the old fashioned typewriter on it, and I had to write a story. I drew the attic first and was compelled to write a story to fit it into the attic, and I wrote it in one sitting, like I wouldn't get away, I wouldn't go to sleep until the whole story was out.

Ironically, or not so ironically, it was about a ghost in the attic who was a woman who was a writer who could not ascend because she had unfinished writing to do. (laughter) Latino Playwrights, which was founded and led by Carla Pinza, a very prominent Latino theater company in New York, did a stage reading of *The Ghostwriter*, I believe in '86, '87. I don't remember dates very well. Then the Nuyorican Poets Café hosted a women writers' workshop where there was a reading of *The Ghostwriter*. And then the WOW Theater, which is a lesbian-run theater company, also produced a reading of *The Ghostwriter*.

It was interesting, the different incarnations. The producer of *The Ghostwriter's* reading at the WOW Theater wanted all the characters to be women, because in the original script the ghost is a woman but the writer who has writer's block that's renting this attic to try and get his book out is a man. The women in the WOW Theater wanted all of them to be women. I thought that was — my play's a gender bender, no problem. (laughs) I thought that that was brilliant and it was a really proud moment for me, to see that the play had created characters that easily could be any gender. People loved the play, although it's never had a stage reading — I mean a full production. It's only been stage readings.

But it's just uncanny the way *The Ghostwriter* kind of like resurfaces in my life. I recently met this woman who produces women playwrights in a Latino theater, I was talking to her about *A String of Pearls*, which is my other half-baked play about seven sisters, and the intertwining and the dynamics of all of the different characters of these seven sisters. And I thought that since she was doing women's theater, that she'd be interested in *A String of Pearls* about the seven sisters, because it had all these meaty roles for seven female actors.

FOLLET: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: When she asked me about my other work, of course I told her about *The Ghostwriter* and she says, "I want *The Ghostwriter*. I have to see *The Ghostwriter*. I want to see that script immediately." She's really very interested in *The Ghostwriter*. I'm like, this play is just something else, you know, (laughs) it's just taking off all on its own and even when I try and push the other plays I've written, it's *The Ghostwriter* that — it deserves its own production. It's really –

24:00

FOLLET: It sounds it.

RODRIGUEZ: I mean, if you think of all the years that it's had different readings and people really interested in it, for it to finally perhaps get a full

production, that's very exciting for me. So, it just comes to mind, my kids don't know what to make of me. Like, Ma, you were a dancer, you're a writer, you do sculpture, what do you do out there? You're a social what? (laughter) So what is it that you do at SisterSong?

What it is, their struggle is trying to explain to their friends what it is their mother does. Because at any given moment I might be writing or I might be really engrossed in an idea for a sculpture. And since I don't have a studio, I carve them out of candles. So they see candles that are all carved. (laughs) Or I'm off to Manila or I'm off to California, to Atlanta, for a SisterSong meeting. But they don't really grasp what's going on in those meetings or what is it that I'm really doing. I get stumped trying to explain to them, because I really defy trying to fit into some category.

And that's why I struggle with, you know, being called an activist. Because I don't — the same way that I'm resistant to using the term class when referring to certain people, like you know, middle class or lower class. I really struggle with this whole idea of categorizing people and titling, at least for myself. I don't take on a role of reproductive rights activist, but people write about me and they call me all kinds of things. It's OK with me to be considered a community organizer or a community leader or the architect of — those are roles that I've played throughout my life when the work was at hand and needed to be done. If I had my druthers, I'd be an artist and I'd be doing it all the time. Because there's a lot of creative work in me that needs to be expressed and done. But because I've been confronted with the reality of such inequities and injustices to people, not just my people, whoever "my people" is, but it's just something that needs to be done. I can't not do it, speak on behalf of people that don't have a voice or make visible people who are traditionally made invisible, or advocate on behalf of issues that I see are integral to someone's quality of life and dignity.

When you think about what drives me to do this kind of work, then yes, well, then that means I'm an advocate or an activist. I still defy being categorized as what type of activist I am at the moment. So, I think the one I'd be most comfortable with would be humanist, because it's just about human dignity, you know, beyond human rights. It's just human dignity. I think that it's unfortunate that the brilliant, powerful, talented women in this movement have to spend their time creating a movement, when their talents can be put to so many other wonderful things that would improve the quality of life of their communities and their work — you know, that they have to be in the struggle, that they have to be struggling for their people to have the right to have a right.

To be spending so much time trying to strategize and articulate the right to have a right, and figure out how it is that the powers that be can finally listen or hear the importance of that — the fact that we have to struggle for our rights takes away — it's actually a disadvantage to the world and our communities, because we're having all these talented people struggling for human rights, when if we had our human rights

and we had reproductive justice, the same brilliant individuals would be contributing wonderful gifts.

FOLLET: Unless we think of the movement for social justice as itself a work of art.

30:40

RODRIGUEZ: Indeed. SisterSong is a work of art and I think that that's what I feel is the most significant contribution that I feel I've made to reproductive rights, because at heart, I'm an artist. What I do is that I translate my writing and my sculpting to social justice work and I suppose that's why I've written proposals that have led to funding of visions and that I could craft. I could craft strategies for those visions to be implemented, to manifest.

FOLLET: If we could take just a short break now and then I want to be sure, before we finish, to ask you about how your current work in the funding universe fits into this whole scheme of people praying for support, as opposed to sitting back and waiting for the creator to decide to give it.

RODRIGUEZ: All right. (pause in recording)

FOLLET: We'd been talking about the process of the oral history and what's happened yesterday and today, and that's part of the story, too. When I first asked you about the documents –

RODRIGUEZ: I thought that what you wanted, which was fine with me — I was very excited about the fact that you wanted the early papers of SisterSong so you could record its early history and the concept and how it was born, and document the whole SisterSong story. I felt very confident with that, because that is where I physically joined the reproductive justice movement and felt that I was contributing, and had all of the early papers because we did a tremendous job in the beginning to document. We knew to document these early meetings and early discussions about what could be. The meetings were all audiotaped, videotaped and recorded in written form.

But then as our conversations continued, you explained to me what the Sophia Smith Collection was really all about and what it really did with respect to taking one's oral history, the woman's life history and all of her documents. And I first said, Well, then you're going to need a truck, first of all. (laughs) And then, what part of my life do you want? Do you want the writer's part or do you want the dancer's part? Oh, you want the reproductive rights part? Well, there's the foster-mother/single-mother part — I was confronted with having to look at my own life, because now someone wanted to hear that story and I was just like, How do you explain my life? (laughs) It's not going to fall into this cute framework that would fit a category.

Perhaps my life doesn't translate into what one would consider a reproductive rights activist, not when you look at all of the years and

35.30

years of sacrifice and work of the leaders in this movement. I don't consider myself in that league. I consider myself as contributing to that movement by being one of the strategists and the visionaries that was creating a framework to have the visions manifest, to sustain the visions. I still see myself as the behind-the-scenes strategist to support the leaders that know how to articulate, that know the vision through and through, that know the key points, that have that laser focus. I've always seen myself, throughout my social justice work, as a comrade in arms and to help build a framework for the work to be done. It doesn't translate to me as being an activist. It translates to me as, from the early days what was instilled with me in terms of community organizing work is that if we all were in agreement of the vision that needed to be done, we worked collectively and we applied our skills wherever they were needed at any given moment. So, I could have been a really good proposal writer and focused on that. But if on a given day, I was needed to watch the kids while others had a meeting, then there was no question, you just did it, because it was all part of the movement.

I still carry those principles with me. So right now, SisterSong needs me in the role of board leadership or governance, and so, if I'm needed to be the treasurer within the board of directors that's being formed, then that's what I'll do for SisterSong.

FOLLET: Who would you define as reproductive activists?

RODRIGUEZ: Loretta Ross, certainly, without a doubt, is one of our leaders. I support Loretta Ross and whatever her vision is, even if I don't always agree with it. There's this sense of commitment that we all have to supporting our leaders in SisterSong. That's part of the role in SisterSong and it doesn't always matter if we don't all agree. We defer to our leadership, and sometimes the leadership defers to my leadership. It works, this whole collective concept, which is that leadership is interchangeable and that our ultimate responsibility is to cultivate leadership in others so that you can be replaced — which is very different than some leaders, who feel very invested in maintaining their position of leadership. I see leadership as one where you provide leadership where it's needed if you're the most qualified within that moment or within that group. But always with having it in mind that you're cultivating those same skills in someone else, that you're sharing your knowledge and your skills so that ultimately you could be replaced — because that's how the movement is going to be sustained.

FOLLET: What's the toughest challenge for SisterSong now, do you think?

40:00

RODRIGUEZ: Goodness, it's this whole transition that we're making organizationally from being a grassroots, collective organization that has been living for ten years under the auspices of fiscal sponsorship and going to the next stage of our organizational development, which is getting incorporated and having a board of directors and a governing body and bylaws. Here

we go again. There's such trepidation that some of us feel because of our past experiences. And we are so worried for SisterSong, that she, as an entity, get through this transitional phase without being harmed or losing her integrity. And it's just not easy.

We have a management circle that has been providing the leadership of the organization, again as a circle, as a collective. Now, because we are formally incorporating, our management circle is transforming into a board of directors. And while I used to be the shepherdess of finances, I'm now the treasurer of the board. (laughs) Language is very powerful. As soon as we start using another language you almost see us going into automatic pilot and following the *Robert's Rules of Order*. You know, we need *Roberta's Rules of Movement Administration*, or something. (laughs) We're still creating another form of organizational integrity, but we still have to deal with the legalities, the requirements. To be a legal organization requires that we have a certain structure, and so we have a lot to learn yet. Our greatest challenge right now is getting through this next phase of the lifecycle of the organization of SisterSong while keeping SisterSong's integrity.

FOLLET: It sounds as if your fear is that success might be SisterSong's downfall.

RODRIGUEZ: Well, it's been known to happen in other organizations. I have tremendous faith in SisterSong and that it's just done the impossible so far and has no problem doing the impossible in the future. We have to step out of the way, we as individuals with our own egos and our own agenda, but that's not always easy. As altruistic as we all may be and as committed as we are to the ultimate goal — for there to be a woman of color movement for reproductive justice, and that that's the priority — we still have to deal with the fact that we're all human beings and have to deal with our own flaws and our own limitations.

FOLLET: Compared to the challenge of organizational development for SisterSong, where do differences between ethnic communities come into the challenges that SisterSong faces? Are they minor? Are they significant? Are they divisive, a source of enrichment and vitality, a source of tension?

RODRIGUEZ: The what, our racial, our ethnic makeup?

FOLLET: However that expresses itself.

RODRIGUEZ: Our ethnic makeup has totally outgrown the original model of having the four ethnic communities of African American, Latina, Asian American and indigenous. It's outgrown that as a consequence of women from other ethnic backgrounds feeling not part of it and asking for us to be more inclusive, which was a no-brainer. So now it includes North African and Middle Eastern women. There's enrichment and then there's challenges in that. The enrichment is that I've always felt

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personally that by including Native American women, it totally enriches us. And it really keeps us on point the same way that they are so connected to the land and to the creator in everything that they do. They bring that element to our work and it enriches our work. It enriches our work. It's invaluable, the element that they bring, but we could say that about every — that every ethnic community that we bring in brings a very unique and invaluable element to the work.

It's a challenge because now there are new ethnic communities that we are welcoming. The challenge is that how do we make them feel they have a voice when the others have been around longer. I'm sure it appears that they have a stronger voice right now, you know, those that are in the leadership. We're looking to include other voices in the leadership, to be more inclusive of other ethnic communities, to be more inclusive of younger generations of women, to be more inclusive of lesbian and gay and transgendered women. But that also challenges our capacity, because we have to have the capacity to deal with the issues that they're going to bring to the fore as well, and to the protocols that would allow them to feel comfortable, the same way that we had to learn certain protocols from Native American women for them to feel comfortable and welcome. Such as, whenever we — we have meetings in various different regions and we're reminded by the Native American community in our collective that if we go have a meeting or a conference at a region, we should always be thanking those whose land we walk on. And that's a protocol that we've had to learn about, acquire, and frankly, be reminded of.

There are new protocols to learn now as we become more inclusive of other ethnic cultures and representatives, and how we remind ourselves to make sure that everyone's voice is being heard. It's very ideal and it works when it works, but it doesn't always work on the day-to-day or it's not going to work completely yet. For example, we need to include others in the board of directors now to be more inclusive of ethnic representation and of youth and lesbians, et cetera. But we're formalizing into a board of directors and we haven't determined the criteria and the procedures and protocols for now inviting others on the board. We're still working that out, where before, you see, we could have just, maybe just [have said], I've just brought someone and I really want them to be part of it. They're young and we need a young voice. And we would all say, Hmm, OK. It was a circle. The main criteria to being on the management circle is that you were willing to do the work.

FOLLET: Just show up.

49:50

RODRIGUEZ: If you're willing to show up and do the work, you're in. But now we're in the midst of crafting bylaws and creating a board of directors and having protocols. We're just still, frankly, taking our sweet time about it so that we're thoughtful enough to — every bylaw or every procedure that we're going to now instill in this organizational culture, that it is in alignment with the SisterSong principles. Easier to say than to do, and

it's not that it's impossible, but it's a challenge, because it takes time. And the nature of our organization is that we're spread out throughout the country and soon throughout the world, because one of our members is now in Morocco. So, whether we thought we were ready to go global or not, we are, right, which is Leila Hessini, from Ipas. Just because she moved to Morocco to do the work there doesn't make her any less of a SisterSong member, and actually, she's our trailblazer in bringing SisterSong to the global community.

FOLLET: How does your work now at the Foundation Center fit into all this?

RODRIGUEZ: I think that my role at the Foundation Center as a training coordinator in their educational services department, with a particular charge to translate the fundraising and philanthropy education in Spanish, and also to focus on outreach to under-resourced, nonprofit organizations that need this information that either don't have access to the Foundation Center or don't even know about the resources at the Foundation Center — I think that it perfectly fits with this rhythm in my life, where positions and jobs have come into my life with a specific mission that totally fits and that apparently seems to be right in line with my own principles or my mission in life. It is a wonderful opportunity for me to draw from the 20-plus years of experience with working in all of these different grassroots organizations, and matching that experience with the invaluable, par excellence training I've gotten from the Foundation Center on philanthropy.

And now, being in a position where there is opportunity for nonprofit organizations to receive the Foundation Center training through someone that can also draw from the 20-plus years of experience with nonprofit organizations and how that information translates to the day-to-day. It's a wonderful place to be in my life right now, to be an educator about nonprofit sustainability and philanthropy as we know it. There's a lot to learn about philanthropy in order to stay abreast of how philanthropy is redefining itself and also looking to what's on the horizon and what's the future of philanthropy. In order to be part of that dialogue, you really need to understand what private philanthropy is in the United States, and that's not something that I truly understood throughout all these years.

It wasn't until I got to the Foundation Center that I understood so many things about the distinctions of different foundations: the different categories and how that informs their protocols; how that informs our analysis of their institutional cultures; how really they account for just about 12 percent of all private giving, and that the majority of the private giving comes from individuals and individuals of low and middle income; and how the key to long-term sustainability for a nonprofit is to create a fundraising strategy that includes diverse funding streams, so that they're not overly dependent on foundations nor government funding but have a diverse portfolio that includes individual donors, foundation support, government, if it's appropriate, but also

earned income is the true strength. I think 50 percent of nonprofit sustainability comes through earned income, which is their own income-generating activities, which can be anywhere from a bake sale or a silent auction to social enterprise, you know, nonprofit ventures.

All this to say that now things are falling into place for me, because now I understand the whole picture. It filled in gaps in knowledge for me, in terms of nonprofit sustainability. Now, with new and emerging nonprofits needing this information — with existing grassroots organizations, they're still grappling with how is it that you live from day to day, year to year. There's existing knowledge of the healthy, viable nonprofit that's been around for years and you just need to bridge that gap of where the knowledge is and who needs the knowledge. I've been asked to serve as that liaison and to focus on those who need the information the most, and to translate that information and that language to those who need it translated.

So, I feel that I'm in a position that allows me to see my life coming full circle, where I can still draw from all of those roles that I've played in the movement, combined with the knowledge of philanthropy and how that works in sustaining of social change agents. It's very fulfilling to me, because many times new and emerging nonprofit representatives are meeting me for the first time when trying to figure out how does this grantmaking thing work, you know, how do you get the grant? And I'm like, Do you have a bookkeeper? (laughs) And they're like, Well, I've got this vision. And I'm like, Do you have a bookkeeper? It's good that they're meeting me for the first time, because I take what the Foundation Center has to offer in their curriculum of fundraising training but I'm always infusing it with the lessons learned in the nonprofit field. We're flashing.

59:10

END TAPE 6

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