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**Santiago, Elba, Oral history interview conducted by Katie Burke, March 29, 2018;
Caribbean Heritage in Cambridge Oral Project, Cambridge Historical Society**



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Oral History Interview with Elba Santiago

Caribbean Heritage in Cambridge Oral History Project

Interview conducted by Katie Burke on March 29, 2018

at Elba's house in the Port neighborhood of Cambridge, MA

Elba Santiago was born in Puerto Rico and moved to Cambridge when she was 17 and a half years old. Elba has worked at a number of jobs in Cambridge, including factory work, child care, and as a teacher's aid in the Cambridge school system. Elba currently lives in a house she owns with her husband in the Port neighborhood of Cambridge. She has three children.

Katie Burke: This is an interview recorded for the Cambridge Historical Society's oral history project on Caribbean heritage in Cambridge. I'm Katie Burke interviewing Elba Santiago at Elba's home in the Port on March 29th, 2018. And can you just start by telling me a bit about where you're from?

Elba Santiago: Oh yeah, like you said, my name is Elba Santiago. I'm from Puerto Rico. I lived in the South of Puerto Rico.

KB: And what was your -- what is your town called?

ES: Guamo; Guamo, Puerto Rico.

KB: What was it like there?

ES: Oh, it was -- when I was young?

KB: Yeah

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ES: Pretty nice. I was in schools, you know, in high schools. We all - it was - we all played. This was different from here. They were more strict over there. When I was in school they were very, very strict in schools. And you have to listen to your teachers, you have to respect your teachers. All they want when you go home you will have some problems too with your parents. But it was nice, we all played together. I used to -- when I was in high school, I used to -- we used to have baseball teams, and we used to play baseball. Some girls played volleyball. But I liked baseball, when I played. And I was -- it was fun. And we had field day that all the schools played different games, one day, the whole day, you know. It was a nice time, nice years.

KB: Where else did you spend time besides school when you were young?

ES: With my parents, you know, and just home with my parents. And we used to go visit the families in the different towns where they lived and, just a simple family, you know. And we didn't go far away but my parents didn't have the money to travel around, you know. We didn't have the money. But it was -- I was happy.

KB: Did you have siblings?

ES: I have [pause] two -- three brothers. Three brothers. It was two brothers and one adopted, but he was like a brother to us. My brother adopted him when he was three days old and he's the best kid. No problem with him. And my two other brothers -- they were -- they grew up and went to high school. My second brother passed away when he was 50. He went to the army, he went to Vietnam, but nothing happened to him in Vietnam, thank god, he just, you know. When he came from Vietnam 10 years later, 5 years later he died. And my other brother, he was working for the National Guard, he also is a National Guardsman. And all my family -- almost all my family went to the army. My uncle went to the army, my cousin went to the navy, my nephew went to the navy. Different branches from the army.

KB: What did your parents do for work?

ES: [03:39] My parents, when I was -- that I remember, when I was like 8, 9, 10 years old -- my mother used to work in a factory in Puerto Rico. It was electronics. They used to make pieces for ships, you know, how do you call ships? They go to -- when they go in the ocean, ships. Airplane ships, airplanes. And she was there for a long time. Then my father used to work in another factory. He used to make sweaters. He was there for many years too. And then he got secret arthritis and he had to stop working. But my mother was a very hard working woman, then with the factory in Puerto Rico. A lot of people, they couldn't find a job, you know, working with

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her. And she was a woman that she used to make things, cook, she did a lot of stuff and she sell, and that's how she lived. Then she came here -- my parents came here after me, after I came to the United States, they came here to Cambridge -- and she was working at an electronic factory in North Cambridge, I don't remember the name, but it was an electronics store. And my father, I think he used to work in Harvard -- a custodian in Harvard. On [unclear] Street. But, yeah, they both worked very hard. And the weekends my mother used to work in the factory. And the weekends she used to make empanadas and things to sell to people in the neighborhood. The whole neighborhood knew my mother.

KB: In Puerto Rico or here?

ES: Yeah, after she finished working during the week, Saturdays and Sundays she used to make things to sell, and everybody in Cambridge knew my mother because they came to my house to buy stuff.

KB: What was her name?

ES: Ilda, it was Ilda. My father's name was Pedro., but the call him Pegine (?). They all worked really hard. And my brothers too. My brother used to work in a company in Watertown. And the other one, well, like I said, he came here but he didn't like it, he went back. My oldest one went back, the one who was in the National Guard. And he decided to go back and stay there. But my brother [pause] you know — Ah, it's hard for me to talk about him because — it's very sad for me because he — I used to go to Puerto Rico when he went back to Puerto Rico, the one who died. I said to him, "I'm going to Puerto Rico," and he said, "Oh good!" He was so happy all the time, you know, happy. And he used to go and pick me up at the airport, and then after he died, the first time I go back I have to hear that. I didn't see him at the airport. I was sad, very sad. He always came with a happy face too, you know.

KB: Oh

ES: Yeah. And then, he has two kids, one boy, one girl.

KB: Did he live in Cambridge too?

ES: He lived here, He used to live in the Columbia apartments, across the street, those apartments.

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KB: Oh, nice. So he was close, really close.

ES: And then he got a divorce. Yeah, well he was always the same with me, always the same. I miss him a lot. Every day I think about him.

KB: What was his name?

ES: Roberto. It was [unclear] but Roberto. Yeah, Santiago. It's sad sometimes, you know.

KB: Yeah, I'm sorry

ES: Yeah, it's okay. I used to say he — I think he got sick because he went to Vietnam and I think he was working with the orange thing they call in Vietnam. The soldiers were working with something from chemicals in Vietnam, the orange — I don't know, they call it orange — and they got cancer, they got cancer because of it. And that's why he — well he never said anything.

KB: Yeah

ES: [07:53] It's sad, you know, but now — Myself, I came here, I tried to better myself. I work here, I work. I have three children, Sheila, Leslie, Tigas (?). My oldest one is 50, and my — the other one if 47, and the other one is 40 [pause] 42. 42 years old. They all, thank god, they are good, good children. I never had problems with them in school, I never had problems outside, you know. Did they ever come to me and complain about it? No. They went to college. I have one who works at the Dana Farber.

KB: Oh, nice!

ES: Dana Farber. She's been there for more than 10 years, in Dana Farber.

KB: What does she —

ES: Supervisor, at Dana Farber. And my oldest one works at the Amigos school in Cambridge. She is the secretary at the school. My son works for the school as a custodian because he lost the job he had before, so this is what he could find, so anyway, he's happy as a custodian and he also works at a gym in Central Square. Boston Sport?

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KB: Okay, yep, I've seen that. I've walked by it.

ES: He works there Sundays, very early in the morning. Five O'clock in the morning till nine o'clock. So they're nice kids, they're nice children.

KB: Yeah.

ES: And his father, ohhh

KB: [laughs]

ES: And his father was very strong, very strong with them when they were growing up.

[09:35] KB: Mm okay. So how did you decide to move to the U.S? Like, what was your story?

ES: Oh [laughs]

KB: How old were you, and—

ES: I was seventeen and a half

KB: Mmm, that's young! [laughs]

ES: I didn't finish the high school but I was gonna be eighteen in March, and I lived in — I got involved with him in February, my husband. And my husband was in the army too. He was in the army. And, you know, we have been together for a long time. But after he came out from the army he couldn't find a job in Puerto Rico. Couldn't find a job, he looked for jobs there were no jobs. So, my neighbor across the street, he came from vacation, from Cambridge, and he said, he said to me, "Would you like to come with us to Boston?" And I said, "Well, I need to talk to him." And, so he came first, he decided to come, he came first with them. And then, a couple of months after that I came. And we lived with these people for maybe a year? But thank god for these people, that they brought us over here, because we grow. From the bottom, we grow to what I have. This is my

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house. But I always thank the people for bringing us over here, to share the house with us until we got better. So I worked in the factory a long time ago. I used to live in Brookline Street. You know Brookline Street?

KB: Yup, I do.

ES: You know the house, the new apartments, houses over there?

KB: Mmhmm

ES: It was a factory there, and I — it was across the street from my building. Everything was over there, you know. It was, it made shoes. Fentin (?) shoes, they call it, Fentin shoes. And I worked there. But I didn't — I was expecting a child, and every time I go inside the factory, the smell of the oil, the machines — I couldn't take it, so I decided not to work there anymore. But it was across the street. Then, I worked at — After that I had my child, my first child, in '67. I came in '66, in '67 I had my child. And then, I couldn't find a babysitter. Or maybe I didn't look so hard because I wanted to stay with my child. A couple months after that I found a babysitter and I went to work in electronics. It was a factory, you know where the Star Market is?

KB: MmHmm.

ES: It was before, Sydney Street, Sydney Street?

KB: I don't think I know...

ES: Okay you go Mass Ave

KB: MmHmm

ES: It's a gas station over there

KB: Okay, like towards MIT, that way?

ES: Yeah, when you're going down there, you turn right at the gas station, right there was a factory.

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KB: Okay, I know what you mean

ES: Electronics. They used to call it K.L.H. They made good, good speakers for the — I think that's a speaker over there, that they made. And then before I went to work in that factory I worked in another factory there. I was making, they were black — factory.

KB: Yup

ES: And I worked there, very nice people. And they even made a shower for my second child there for me

KB: That is so nice

ES: It was nice, they made a shower for me, and then at K.L.H. — I used to make good money there, I think it was good money at that time, in those years. I made good money there. And then I had my second child and I didn't work for a long, long time. Then my son born — five years after I have my second child, I had a boy. I used to live in the apartments in Columbia Terrace, and I found a babysitter and was lucky because the girl was — said, "Oh, my director of the day care center is looking fo a Spanish speaking person because Spanish is common to them, to the center. Why don't you apply?" Bingo.

KB: [laughs]

ES: I went, applied. Very nice person there, the supervisor over there, very nice. She called me the next day!

KB: Nice!

ES: And I worked there twelve years. I worked there for twelve years and after that they moved the center. Because that center, it was — belonged to the company I was working, K.L.H., for the employees. Well, they moved to Pennsylvania, or another state, to the east. And my job, it ended. So I applied, after the center, I applied to the Head Start program. I worked with the Head Start program. Margaret Fuller used to have a day care center here, I used to go there part time. And it's — I never, myself, I never said "I'm gonna stay home, I don't want to work there." I *moved* all the time. I tried to look for a job all over the place. No matter what. When I was working for the Head Start, I applied for the school department. They called me. And I worked in the school department for 24 years.

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KB: Wow

ES: The Amigos School.

KB: What did you do there?

ES: Assistant. What they call now paraprofessionals. They don't call it now assistant, they call it paraprofessionals. But I worked there for 24 years. You have to do the same thing the teachers do.

KB: Yeah

ES: [15:40] So, I went to take a course. Oh, before that — I forgot to tell you — that I got my G.E.D.

KB: In Cambridge?

ES: At that time they used to give it in Somerville. How you call that, Davis Square?

KB: MmHm

ES: Davis Square. In one building over there. And I passed the test.

KB: Nice

ES: I passed the test, and I have my certificate because I said "No, I need my G.E.D."

KB: How soon was that after you got to the U.S., that you got your G.E.D.?

ES: Oh, quite a while. Because sometimes I was home with the kids, you know. It was hard for me to go out. But soon, my kids started going to school, since I tried to go outside see what is good for — what I can find for myself? So they — someone told me, "Go to Davis Square. They give you the test for the G.E.D.'s. Maybe you should go and try." So I said, "I'm not afraid." And I didn't take any English, I just — I took the test in English and I passed

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KB: Good for you!

ES: I passed. Maybe one of the subjects they teach over there, I had to go twice, you know, to pass it. But I did. I did. And it was — you have to better yourself. You cannot sit down at home and feel sorry for yourself. You have to go out and find ways for you to better yourself. That's the way I feel.

KB: So when you came to the U.S. you said you moved in with a family at first?

ES: Yes.

KB: How was it for you when you first arrived?

ES: [17:23] Oh. Well to tell you the truth, my first year here — I came in the summer time cause it's the summer like home. But when the winter came [pause] I cried. I looked out the window. I said, "My island is so warm." But I said "that's not everything," you know, "what am I gonna do if I go back?" He didn't want to go back. So, it was very hard for me to get adjusted to the weather, because it's not my weather. Its warm weather over there, 80 degrees, 85 degrees, 90 degrees all the time. But, little by little you get adjusted. And now, I get used to this life in here. And the people that I came here to, that I moved here [with]. They are not here anymore. They moved back to Puerto Rico a long time ago. A *long* time ago. But they have a house over there and everything, you know. But anyway, it's not easy. You have to — because if I would have said to myself, "Oh, I'm gonna go back because Puerto Rico is warmer." That's not gonna — I'm not gonna live with that. You need to *work* to live. You need money to live. You need money for your house, for your apartment, for shopping, for grocery shopping for your kids. It's not easy. But, thank god my kids are grown ups. And they're good kids. But I still think sometimes that I feel like, you know, that I want to go back, but sometimes I say "no." I don't know. I go to visit. Maybe two months, three months, and then I come back. You wanna go back. But I don't know. My husband wants to go back but I don't.

KB: Do you have a lot of family that's still there?

ES: Right now, I have nieces, cousins, one brother over there. Because the other one, I told you he was adopted, he lives now in — he came back this year and he lives in Lowell. My family is not a big family. And they have kids

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but they don't have a lot of kids either. I have three kids, they have three kids, and the other has two, that's it. Not a big —

KB: Yeah, my family is like that too

ES: Very short. But, thank god, we are here and I'm happy.

KB: [20:08] So when you first got here, were there other Puerto Ricans that you used to be friends with, like —

ES: Oh. When I came here, there was a lot of people. A lot of people from my hometown, from Guamo, here. They have another family that — he helped us a lot too. They're from Guamo. They used to live in the same building, when I came from Puerto Rico, they used to live in the same building. They were very nice people. We had a lot of Puerto Ricans in Cambridge when I came here. All over Puerto Rico, but most of the people — and that was strange — they're from my home town in Guamo. Here! Living here.

KB: Did you already know them?

ES: No, because some came — they're from Guamo, from out of the town. You know, they don't live in town, they live out. In the suburbs, is that how you call it?

KB: What is it?

ES: They live in the —

KB: Oh the suburbs, yeah

ES: And a lot of people live there. Which, they have some people in here. I had one friend who lived on the corner of Columbia and Washington Street. He also owned the house, he's from my hometown. But also some of them, they just passed by. Some of them, they moved back. Some of them, they had houses in different towns in Massachusetts, like Somerville, Chelsea, Everett. So they bought houses, so they moved from Cambridge. And that's sad. But we still have some Puerto Ricans in here in Cambridge. Not too many as we had before, but it's difficult, you know, when you come from an island, to get adjusted in a place. Another city,

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another state of the United States. But, thank god, Boston and Massachusetts, it's okay. I would not change it for another state.

KB: How was it to find a job when you first got here?

ES: You know, like I told you, across the street was a company, I went there and applied, they told me "come." I went. I couldn't stand the smell from the machines because I was expecting a baby. I don't think it was good for me because the oil in the machines when they're making shoes. So I went, I said, "no." And then I went and applied at a factory, that bra factory they have in — I can't remember the name of the factory.

KB: Yeah, someone else mentioned that too in another interview I did. It was Marian Darlington Hope's mother worked there? At a bra factory, maybe it was a different one but —

ES: No, no, that's the only one [laughs]

KB: There's only one, okay. But I think she said it was near Central, right?

ES: Yeah! It's right there. In Sydney Street, where the Star Market is. Right there. And then I applied, they called me. Because my problem with me was — I mean, not problem — my thing was, I need to better myself in English. All the places that I started working, most of them were American, you know. All the people there speak English. So when I came to this country, I had some knowledge of English from school. I don't know why people come and they say, "I don't speak English." If you have this [points to head], because they teach you English in Puerto Rico since the first grade, kindergarten, until you finish high school. And that was my best subject in school, English. In Spanish I was — how you call that? Poor! I was poor in Spanish in the class. But my best subject was English, I had B, I had B. Not A, but I had B, B+. So, for my interviews in my jobs, I did it by myself, I went by myself. I talked to the people by myself. After the bra, I went to the K.L.H. That company was English only, you know? I worked there, it took me — they picked me, I worked there four years! I think I worked there for four years. In the [unclear] factory. And like I told you before, from that place I went on and on and on, climbing. I have a friend, you know, I try to help her, you know, I said — She came here the same time I came here and I tried to help her, because she didn't get the English very — you know, it was not for her. It's not for everyone, not everyone learns the same way, you know what I mean? It's hard, but I help her all the time. That was the friend who called me here.

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KB: [laughs] Oh, really? The one who gets you the newspaper?

ES: The one who gets me the news. So anyway, we try to help each other, you know? We try to help each other. But I had no problem because — do you know how I also learned my English? [pause] Watching English TV. The soap operas.

KB: [laughs] Okay, I was gonna ask.

ES: At that time, at that time. I don't watch them for thirty years now. But I put on TV on the soaps so I could listen to people talking. How they expressed themselves. And I tried to get the words, you know? So, I learned. I didn't go to school in here for English, but I tried to better myself, like I said before. You have to. If you want to better your life, you have to try hard.

KB: [26:22] So how did you meet your husband?

ES: [Laughter] I was fourteen years old. He lived in my neighborhood, my husband lived in my neighborhood. I was fourteen years old. And I saw him around because we lived in the same area here, you know, we lived in the same area. And one time I went to buy — some people in the houses, they had to sell Icy, icy? In different tastes, coconut, different things. Like Italian ice?

KB: Okay, yeah

ES: Something like that. And I went to house and buy one, I said — he was there! No intention or anything, you know, I said, "You want one?" So I gave him one. And since then we started talking to each other. We went to the same high school, same school. We know from the neighborhood. Until he decided to go to the army. He was there two years, in the army. And then when he came back, well, we decided to live together. We didn't marry at that time. We eloped [laughter]. Eeee and then, you know how long — when I was four years living with him, that's when we got married.

KB: Really?

ES: At the city hall in Cambridge. Forty years. But we were not married before for four years. People ask me, "How did you last so long?" [laughter] I said, "Well, that's life," you know, "that's life." But he's a hard worker,

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he's a carpenter. He worked for the — oh, he used to work at the K.L.H. too, with me, at the same company. Then he worked for the Cambridge City Hospital. He worked at the company that made installations in the bars, you know, when they make drinks and they push those things and the drink comes out?

KB: Oh, yeah

ES: He made those installations. And he worked for the Housing Authority, and he's retired from Housing Authority. And he was a carpenter at the Cambridge city. Only two carpenters in the Cambridge city, it was him and another one. Well he retired from being a carpenter. He made those cabinets [point to kitchen]

KB: Wow, those are beautiful

ES: Yeah, he made those cabinets. He has not finished yet. See, this side here? He has not finished. Well, he made these cabinets.

KB: Well, those look really nice.

ES: He does everything in the house. These things, he made everything. He doesn't have to hire a car — he says, "I'll do it myself, I'll do it myself." That's fine! You know, when you drive you don't trust another driver, you know, when you drive. So a carpenter doesn't trust another carpenter [laughter]. That's the way it is. Well he goes out. And he's been a good father and a good husband. Thank God for that.

KB: So were you already planning to move the U.S. and then he came back and you decided to go together?

ES: No, like I said, my friends in Puerto Rico, the couple, They asked us. They asked him if he wanted to come to this country with them, because he couldn't find a job. He came with them, found a job, then I came.

KB: Okay.

ES: Then I came, and so and so.

KB: Mmhmm.

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ES: My life started. A new era [laughter]

KB: [30:06] And how did you find this house?

ES: Oh, it's a longer story. When he worked for the city, Cambridge city, a guy owned this house. Not from here, from another town. He told my husband, "Do you want to buy a house? I'm selling the house." My husband thought the he was just joking. He said "nah." He said, "Yeah, I'm selling the house!" You know how much he sold this house? [long pause] 17,000 dollars.

KB: Oh my god.

ES: It was about, more than 40 years ago, for 17,000 dollars. But the house was, it needs a lot of, how you call — fix up a lot of stuff in the house. This apartment here, this is two apartments in here. So, this is one apartment in two apartments. Because that side was another apartment, but he made it all together, all of that, because we have three kids. So, he wanted every child to have a room, their own room. But if you close it, that's another apartment over there. Anyways, so —

KB: Is it all one floor, or do you have an upstairs from here?

ES: No, no, this is one floor.

KB: Okay

ES: And then, it's two apartments downstairs. My daughter lives in one, and I have another one over there on the side, two bedroom.

KB: So you own this whole house and then you rent downstairs?

ES: [nods]

KB: Okay

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ES: Yeah. So when we came to — he said when he went to the basement, oh my god. It was full of wood, you know wood that you put in a stove?

KB: Oh, firewood? Yeah

ES: He said up to the top. The guy, he didn't do anything for the house, he didn't fix the house. I remember a comedian can let the home camera (?) used to live in this side here, and I think he had a wood stove or something. But my husband told everybody they need to move, you know. Because he needed to fix the house, and he's still working on the house. When you own a house, you never finish. It's It's always something that you have to — this year it's something and this year it's something else. But, yeah, you want to see it? Come here.

KB: Sure!

ES: I want to show you.

KB: I'll take that, actually [picks up recorder, ES and KB walk to living room area]

ES: So this is what divided the two apartments, okay?

KB: Mmhmm

ES: So that apartment, this will be a room there, this will be another room.

KB: Okay

ES: Bathroom, another room, that's for my son when he comes to stay here. That's my son. That's a small room but you fit a bed and a bureau. And a closet, he has a closet.

KB: Enough for a little boy [laughs]

ES: This is — he [my husband] paints, he draws.

KB: Whose room is this?

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ES: No, that's him. He uses it to draw

KB: Your son or your husband?

ES: No, my husband. He paints, he draws.

KB: That's really great!

ES: SO I don't touch anything in here. I don't even come in here [laughs]

KB: Yeah. This is such a beautiful room.

ES: Yeah. Look at his — he draws his father, that's his father.

KB: Oh, wow

ES: That's his father. This is my mother, my father. This is the one they adopted.

KB: Is that — who are these people, in the middle?

ES: That's the one — my brother, the one she adopted

KB: Oh, okay.

ES: Yeah, and then this is my nephew who went to the navy. Yeah. You see my two daughters when they were little?

KB: Ah, so cute [laughs].

ES: That's my son over there.

KB: Okay. He's handsome.

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ES: That's Sheila, over there with the boy. That's Sheila, this is her [points to photograph]. This is my niece. Oh, I forgot to tell you about my niece. I raised my niece. When my brother died, my mother died, then I raised her too. Now she's married. That's my other daughter Leslie when she was in high school. This is her.

KB: [laughs] Who is this little boy

ES: That's my — the one who is in college.

KB: Oh, okay.

ES: That's him.

KB: He's so cute.

ES: That's him too over there.

KB: Oh, okay

ES: And that's Marilyn Monroe [points to her photograph]

[laughter]

KB: Beautiful! I love that picture. Who is this over there?

ES: Which one, these two?

KB: These two up here.

ES: No, that's my parents, my parents. Yeah that's my parents

KB: Oh, okay. Nice. And then this is you and your husband?

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ES: Yes, that's my husband when we were younger.

KB: That's a nice picture.

ES: That's a nice picture. Yup. Life goes on, eh?

KB: Yeah .

ES: And then this one — see, we have two bathrooms. One and another one. This is a room over here, another room over there, and another room over there. It's the same.

KB: It's nice to have so much space though.

ES: I know. He's planning to close it.

KB: Oh really? And then rent out the other side.

ES: [nods]

KB: Okay

ES: He said "we're gonna [unclear] up on you. Not used to that.

KB: Yeah.

ES: Anyway, so any more questions?

KB: Yeah. I have some more. Thanks for show me the apartment.

ES: I like plants. I love plants [motions to plants by the window].

KB: Yeah.

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ES: And like I said, when you have plants the oxygen is good for you. Plants have oxygen in your house. They give you oxygen.

KB: Yeah, yeah. I know, you have really nice light in here too.

ES: Yes, all the windows

KB: [36:26] The skylight too. So what was the neighborhood like when you first moved here?

ES: When I first moved here from -- oh, I forgot to tell you. When I lived with those people, there was another lady and a her husband, they owned a house and were from my home town too. In Western Ave. And they said — I was looking for an apartment and I couldn't find an apartment. And then she said, "well I have an —" Well it was a — we call it now a studio, okay? But what they had was bigger than this, a lot of space [unclear]. I used to pay 60 dollars a month. 60 dollars a month. And at that time it was a lot of money because I was not working. I had already had my first child. And I said, "Well, we'll take it," you know? We lived there for a couple of months or a year or something like that, and then we found another apartment with two bedrooms, and we moved. And then from the place, I moved here to Columbia Apartments. And when I came to Columbia Apartments, it was a lot of Puerto Ricans living in the apartments. It was a nice, nice place to live. Some from my home town again, and again, it was nice. The children used to play inside, they didn't have to go outside to play. And we all were united. We made parties together, we made functions together, because we used to have a basement, and we —you know for functions at the Columbia — and it was nice. At that time it was very nice. Everyone — you could leave your door open. Nothing happened. And the guy whose in control of the apartments, in charge of the apartments, has — he put a sprinkler, not coming from the ground, but he just invented something, a sprinkler, and all the kids used to go there in the water. They didn't have to go outside!

KB Really? That was inside that they had the sprinkler?

ES: Yeah, it was like a shower [laughter]

KB: Sounds like fun

ES: They liked it, you know, they liked it. Oh no, one time I counted how many kids we had in those apartments. One hundred and one kids, children in there. From little ones to grown ups. It was a nice place to live. And from

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then, I moved to the apartments in the front, third floor. That's when I had my son, over there. And it was nice too, I mean, I had no problem, you know. We used to — it was a parking lot over there. You know the park now? It was a parking lot. And all the guys got together there in the afternoon, the guys who lived in the apartment, talk, have a drink, you know. And after that, some things changed, they changed. I can say from better to medium. But, like I said, I live my life. I don't pay attention to those things over there. But it was a good — it's a nice neighborhood, no matter what, I can tell you. I live out my life. It's a nice neighborhood. People know me around [laughter] I go out with my grandson, he says, "Well Grandma, why do so many people have to stop to talk to you in the street?" I said, "Because I lived here for a long time and everybody knows me." The kids went to my school, I was a teacher with them, I was a teacher. Some of them, I knew them before that, before they had children. Some of those children have more children, you know. And I had all those children too. Yeah, but I say to my son, my grandson, "If you go to the street and you find some person that wants to talk to you, that you know, you stop and talk to the person, or you say 'hi, how are you doing?' And keep walking." He said, "Grandma, you stay talking." [laughter] He's funny, I got to say. So that's the way it is when you live here for so many years, you know, so many people, I said to him. And then he didn't say anything else [laughter].

KB: He'll understand one day

ES: Yeah, he'll understand. But, you know, the neighborhood is — I like it. I like it. And, like I said to you before, everything is near. You know, you don't need a car. If you don't have a car, you can go to Central Square, you have the Spanish stores around. You know, you need something for groceries, now you go to the H Mart. Train, the subway station is near, I like it. The neighborhood is good.

KB: How did it feel when other people started moving away that you knew in the neighborhood?

ES: [41:56] It was sad for me, very sad, because I said, "Oh well." But, I was sad but at the same time I was happy because some of them, they bought their own house, so they have — they own the house, you know? And it is good for them that they keep moving up. Other people went back to Puerto Rico to live, because they say they didn't want to stay here. You cannot say nothing about that. But, when people start moving around, yeah it was sad because, you know, you're not going to see them around anymore. You want to talk to them, you have to call them. Another town, Somerville, Everett, whatever. And yeah, but that's life. They have to move on too. I'm very happy for them that they own the house. Most of them, my friends, five or six of them, they own houses. Or more. Or moved to another state, New York, Philadelphia, Connecticut, Florida. I know a good family, a

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Dominican family, that lived in the building I did, in the back. A very good family to me, a very, very good, a nice family, and they moved to Florida. Well, that's life, you know, you — what can you do?

KB: What was it about Cambridge that drew you here? Like, why did you move here instead of New York or somewhere else?

ES: Because I didn't know anyone, you know, from New York. People that I know from New York — just that people that I told you lived in Cambridge, and we came to Cambridge. And I'm glad I came to Cambridge, because I love Cambridge. This is my life here in Cambridge. But I don't think I would live in another state. At my age now? No.

KB: [43:59] What places did you spend time at in Cambridge besides home and besides when you were at work?

ES: Oh, I go around, you know, I go to the festivals in Cambridge, I go whatever they have. If they have something in Harvard Square I go, just to check. And I go to — we used to have a Puerto Rican festival here. We don't have it anymore. We don't have it anymore. They have one in Boston. That's what I go, we go in the summertime Sometimes that have flea markets, things like that. I'm not a person that likes to go far away, no. I stay in the area. So, I don't like to drive far away. I'm a driver, a city driver. That's [unclear], but I don't go far away. Where I go — if I go to New Jersey to see my uncle who lives New Jersey, who was in the army for 25 years. He's retired now. I go by train, I don't drive. No, I'm not a big driver. But Cambridge, I don't know, I just like Cambridge.

KB: And the Margaret Fuller House breakfast thing that that you do, how did you get started doing that?

ES: Okay, my friend Stefanie, who lived in the house over there, she asked me one day if I wanted to come to breakfast, to join a group. I said, "Let me think about it," because I not a person who likes to — you know. So I said, "Okay, et me think about it." And one day I called and said "I'm going to check, I'm going to go one Tuesday with you to see how the environment is." And I liked it and I stayed with the group. And they love me, they like me a lot. They like me a lot. And I also go on Fridays. I go play Bingo, it's through the Salvation Army. They don't call it Bingo, the call it Smile.

KB: Smile?

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ES: [45:59] Smile. And I go there on Fridays. Which is another different group. I haven't been going to the elderly services in — across the City Hall, they have a thing in there for the elderly people different activities. I haven't been there yet — people ask me, "Go, go, go!" I want to try one day and see what happens. But I can't — I'm retired but I can't be bored. I don't see myself everyday, everyday doing something — no. I like to be home too. I do things at home too. Otherwise I'm all week out. I'm not that type of person.

KB: Mmhmm, it's nice to be able to relax too after working.

ES: I, myself, I go to Central Square almost every day. I walk, walk around, buy something for the house. Just for the walk, you know, to walk around, to do the exercise. That's all, that's all I need. I'm not a person who likes to be all involved in different things, like big parties and things like that, no. I like simple things, at my age {laughs}.

KB: [47:19] So how do you keep Puerto Rican culture in your life now, while you're here?

ES: Oh no, I follow my culture. I cook the same way you cook in Puerto Rico, the same food. I teach my kids how to cook Puerto Rican food, that's what they do. Once in a while I change my menu {laughter}, like Italian, I make pasta and other things, but most of the things are Puerto Rican food. Like I said, I have my Spanish store near me, so I go buy my Spanish products over there when I need. It's not a big — we eat like rice every day. Before, when my kids were little, I used to eat cooked rice every day, white rice. Rice, beans, plantains, meat, They like all kinds of things, they don't care. Anyway, what about them. By the time they keep growing up, they changed the menu for themselves. I said, "Okay!" Once in a while, they say "Ma, can you give me some rice and beans?" But, I follow my culture, I don't change my way of cooking, my food — no. I make different things. Fritters, or whatever, you know [laughter].

KB: And you can get all the groceries that you need around here?

ES: Most of them. Yeah, most of them.

KB: Mmhmm.

ES: Most of them. And at the supermarkets they have our products too. Market Basket has go — Goya products, most of them, Market Basket has the Goya products. The two stores here - one on Columbia, one on the corner of Columbia and Washington, they have the products, our products, the Spanish stores, you know. Excuse me, I

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have a sinus problem. I think people, sometimes they don't hear me, and at night here, it hurts a lot. But anyway, yeah, that's how I get my products. But I cook — I said to myself, "Why should I change my way of cooking? Because I'm in the United States now?" I mean, I cook, we cook United States food, we cook steaks, we cook ribs, whatever, but most of the time it's Spanish food. I cook anything you want me to cook.

KB: What's your favorite thing to make?

ES: [laughter] Well, I like to cook in the oven, not fried. In the oven. Ribs, I like to eat it with plantains. I make good brown(?) rice and beans, but you don't have to, I just eat it like that with the plantains. Or fried potatoes, you know. In the summertime we cook outside, my husband has a grill outside, we cook outside. That tastes better on the grill. I like steaks too [laughter]. I like steak, but I'm not crazy about those big steaks, no. The small ones, they're better for me. And the skinny, they're better [laughter]. But, he likes to eat steak, my husband. Oh, he loves it. But no, I don't change my food, no. My daughters, they cook too, the same thing. My daughter downstairs, she cooks rice and beans too. My other daughter cooks rice and beans.

KB: How did they learn to cook?

ES: [points to herself, laughter] from Mommy! From Mama! Yeah.

KB: Does your son cook too?

ES: Sometimes. But no — he keeps telling me, "Mom, you have to teach me how to cook Puerto Rican food." I said, "Yeah," 41 years — 42 years old? [laughter] He's funny. But, he loves my food. Sometimes at night he calls me from work. He says, "Mom, I'm coming to your house. Did you cook today?" He comes upstairs and he eats everything. He like a [unclear]. He eats everything. He has a good appetite, I'll put it that way, he has a good appetite. It's funny. And when he's not here, I miss him, because he's always talking to me, you know [unclear]. He has his own apartment in Somerville. We have another house in Somerville.

KB: You do?

ES: Uh huh. We have another house in Somerville, in Sydney Street. It's near the McGrath Highway.

KB: Okay, yup.

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ES Yeah

KB: It's nice that they're all so close still.

ES: Oh yeah, they don't like to go far away, no. They like Cambridge too. They grew up in Cambridge! But sometimes — and the other thing can be that the rent started getting up and up and up, and also that's why a lot of people move from Cambridge too, Spanish people too, because they cannot afford the rent. People will work and they can't afford the rent, it's too much. Like the apartment that my husband is renting downstairs, people tell my husband, "You could charge, like, 2000 dollars for that apartment." Because it's a big — it's a nice apartment. Yeah, anyway, we'll see what happens.

KB: Yeah. I'm always afraid too. My apartment is really cheap, the rent right now, but my landlord is always joking like "I should gut this place and turn it into condos!" We're like, "No, please—"

ES: Maybe he will.

KB: I know, he should eventually. It's so old too that it's kind of run down now, but the rent is so cheap I don't think I could find somewhere else like that.

ES: How much you — excuse me, but how much do you pay?

KB: It's like a two and a half bedroom. Like there's one small room that we have a twin bed in and use for guests and stuff, but for the whole thing it's 1400.

ES: Mmm

KB: So that's pretty good, yeah

ES: Well I said to myself, you know, if I were younger like you people, I would buy a condo and with that rent you could pay your condo, because — people think because you buy a house you have money. No. You have to pay mortgage, you have to pay insurance, you have to pay the city tax, what else? If anything breaks you have to

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fix it. Did I say water? Water, you have to pay the water that the tenants spend, that the tenants waste. And it's about 600 hundred dollars every three months, or 400, it depends.

KB: That's a lot

ES: It's a lot! My insurance is for the house — You *have* to have insurance. It's necessary, you know? And especially — we are retired, both. And this guy here, you see this house here? [points to house outside window] The guy bought that house, [unclear] he lives in the back. He's renovating the whole house, new, he put everything new. The apartments at 2400 dollars. So what he's doing is he rents the apartment for two or three months. People coming to the apartment two or three months and they go. That house fits in this house. But he's a nice guy. Good neighbors, we have good neighbors around here. We have another neighbor over there, Rose. She lived in the community for many years, very nice person. Stefanie, the lady I told you, she had me for the Margaret Fuller House, That was her house.

KB: Oh, this one right here?

ES: This one, and she sold it to him. And she lives over there, in that building over there. But the house needs a lot of fixing But now it's new inside. Everything is new.

KB: Have you ever gotten people approaching you to see if you want to sell your house here?

ES: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes, a lot of people approach us too to buy the house. But I said to my husband, "I raised my kids in this house." Maybe someday we will sell it, you know, but not now. Not yet. It will be very sad for me. That would kill me. Really.

KB: How long have you lived in this house?

ES: About 45 years.

KB: That's a long time.

ES: And we *still* need to fix some things around the house. It's not easy, it's a lot of money. Lucky that my husband is a carpenter and he knows how to do things around the house. Otherwise, it would be a lot of money.

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He just put the roof — two years, three years ago — the roof, the whole roof — that cost about 30,000 dollars. Really, and he did it. God bless him, you know, God bless him. But it's not easy. But I'm happy I have the house, I have a place to live, I have a place for my children, and now they're all grown up, they go by their own way.

KB: And they can come back her to see you.

ES: And they can come back. Oh, they come every day [laughter]. This one downstairs, the one who lives downstairs, every time she comes from work, 4 o'clock, 4:15 she's here.

KB: That's so nice

ES: Yeah.

KB: [57:26] So how do you stay in touch with family in Puerto Rico?

ES: How do I keep in touch with them? We have — we call each other, once in a while. Not every — because they have their own things to do, you know? They're taking care of the grand children, because people have to work over there, you know? And my brother is not doing too good, he has diabetes, and my sister in law has arthritis. But they're still living! And we keep in touch with each other, calling each other.

KB: How often do you go back there?

ES: I went back — I try to go like every year, but this time it's been like a year and a half that I haven't been to Puerto Rico. And with the storm, I said to my husband, "No, you go, I'll stay," after the storm. He went in December to check the house, and the house was fine but a lot of trees came down in the yard, like fruit trees, like mango tree, avocado tree, they all came down. Big avocados! This big. Big. And he went to clean the yard with his nephew. His nephew had been over there a lot. He's a good help for my husband. He also does carpentry. So, he helped him clean the yard, and other things in the house. Okay, he cannot do it by himself. He can't. But, that's it, you know? My family comes to see me when I go over there, I go to their houses. They come to my house to see me, you know. We are missing each other. Like I said, I don't have a big, big family. Anyway, that's life.

KB: Do you feel like you're from Cambridge?

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ES: [laughs] I — Well, like I said, I've lived here 52 years. 52 years, because my daughter is going to be 51, so I've been here 52 years. And I only lived in Puerto Rico for 17 and a half years [laughs]. I like both. I can say that, you know. But yeah, I feel more from Cambridge, yes. But I like both.

KB: They have different things, different weather.

ES: Different, change of situation, weather, yeah. And it's all different when you go over there and you're free. You're free, like you aren't in a cage. You're out of the cage and you go —

KB: What do you do when you're there?

ES: Well the first thing I do when I go there is clean the house. Clean the house. I spend one week cleaning the house. Did I show you my house?

KB: No

[long pause]

ES: Let me see. Where's my house over here?

KB: Oh, that's beautiful. This whole house is yours? That looks so nice, you can sit outside on the porch —

ES: Yeah! No, it has a — around

KB: Wow, that's big!

ES: But I have a better thing to show you. It's better like that way —

KB: That looks so nice. Do you have someone to like, take care of the garden?

ES: Yeah, his nephew. But, like I said, with the storm, everything went — and this is the swimming pool.

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KB: [laughs] That's so nice

ES: See, all these streets, they are not there anymore because the storm tore down the trees. Yeah. He made the swimming pool too. He made it.

KB: Wow. Have you been back there since the storm?

ES: No, he did. No, no, I didn't;

KB: Yeah

ES: He told me he was very sad. A lot of things, a lot of houses — Well, my house is remain, so it's hard too — he said one or two windows, but the rest — maybe just water

KB: Yeah, that's pretty lucky.

ES: But, it's not easy

KB: Yeah. Well, I wish you the best for your trip there. In a week!

ES: Yeah, in a week

KB: But, I think I've gone through all my questions. Do you have anything else you want to say?

ES: um, well, like I said before, when I came to this country from Puerto Rico, I bettered myself. My husband and I, we bettered ourselves together. And, I have my three kids in this country, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And they all grew up here, they went to all the schools, they went to Rindge and Latin School They went to college. So, what else can you ask, you know? Yeah. I'm happy to be here. Very happy. Anything else?

KB: I don't think so. Thank you so much. This was great.

ES: If anything, you call me

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KB: I will.

ES: No really, I'm very happy to be here. Very happy.

KB: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

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