

THE HOBOKEN
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: TOM OLIVIERI
INTERVIEWER: HOLLY METZ (and Robert Foster)
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TAPE 1, SIDE 1

HM: We're continuing from an interview that brought us up to 1965. What was Hoboken like during that time -- 1965?

TO: Well, in 1965, as I recall, Hoboken was a totally different Hoboken from the one we know today, in the year 2005 -- forty years ago. There were still a lot of neighborhoods in Hoboken. When I say neighborhoods, I mean ethnic neighborhoods. You still had areas, entire blocks, where the different ethnic groups were predominant. For example, on 12th and Willow, where I grew up, you had two blocks that were basically totally Puerto Rican -- the block between 13th and 12th and Willow, and the block between 12th and 11th and Willow. At that time there were 135 apartments on the block between 12th and 13th and Willow,

which was known as the Tootsie-Roll Flats -- even though I never heard it called that when I was a kid. I never heard it called that. And you had another 98 families, because there were two buildings of ten families each, and one building with 8 apartments on 12th Street, between Park and Willow, and there were seven buildings on Willow Avenue, between 11th and 12th. So you had close to 240 families there, and I would say 99.9% of them were Puerto Rican. This was before, way before, the arrival of all the Latin American immigrants here, such as Dominicans, Mexicans, or Salvadorians, which are more common here in Hoboken now.

HM: So people came here and they found work? There was work in different factories during that time, still?

TO: Well, as I recall, people -- there was work aplenty here for people of lesser means. There was not a lot of work available, or employment available, in offices. It was not a Wall Street crowd. But there were certainly many, many factories here. There were still pressers here, back in 1965; a lot of coat factories; the garment industry was heavy here in Hoboken. Today, most of those buildings are now residential -- they're lofts -- and

some have been turned into actual apartments, individual apartments. In places such as 10th and Clinton, 10th and Grand, that's an example: all the buildings that are there were, at one point, factories.

HM: So people from Puerto Rico who worked there -- did they also own the factories?

TO: No. The factories were owned mostly by Italians. The workers -- the seamstresses, the pressers, the floor help -- were mostly Hispanic, even though there were some Italian workers, and there were also some workers from Yugoslavia, at that time. But the factories themselves, the places themselves, were owned by Italians. And you had variety, not only coat places. I remember on 10th and Clinton you had Thomas Wire & Spring. These people worked with the government, somehow. As I recall, they made all sorts of different-sized springs for machinery. I don't think for beds, but, rather, for machinery and that. You had Rego Electric," on 830 Monroe Street. That was a big, huge place that took up an entire block. Now this is right near where that building that's going on up, 900 Monroe, near the light rail station, down there.

At that time, like I say, most of the workforce here, in the type of place that we're talking about, was Hispanic, and predominately Puerto Rican.

HM: Were they unionized?

TO: I don't recall any union. I don't recall any union. A couple of years later, after that, around 1967, I worked for Bali Bra Company. It was a company that was in Jersey City; the building is now owned by the Port Authority of New York -- where you come down the ramp, that big building that's right there. That was the Bali Bra building. I worked at Bali Bra, and I was a shop steward for the ILGWU, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. But I don't recall any unions here in Hoboken. Now my brothers-in-law were pressers. They made the best money, because pressing was a specialized job, so they made more money than the seamstresses or the floor help. But I don't recall any union, ever.

HM: And no efforts to unionize?

TO: And no efforts to unionize. No. I think the reason why a company like Bali Bra, which was a huge

outfit -- they had plants in Florida; they had plants in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where the big flood was, at one point; they had plants in Puerto Rico -- and I think the reason they were unionized was because they also came from New York, which, I think, in those days, was more advanced and the workers were more up-to-date as to what their rights were, than what we had here in New Jersey.

HM: And bigger shops.

TO: And bigger shops, yeah.

HM: Were pressers mostly men?

TO: The pressers were all men, all men. I've never seen a woman presser. It was heavy, hard work. The irons were big, the heat oppressive.

HM: And what did a presser do?

TO: Well, a presser did a variety of things on the garments. The pressers -- you had guys who did a whole coat, the inside, the lining; and you had guys that did certain parts of the coat, like the sleeves, the necks.

I think, depending on the type of garment that it was -- whether it had fur, whether it had fancy cuffs. But I recall that I gave it a try one time, and they put me on to press the coat's lining. And it's very delicate, because you just go over it quickly, with the iron. If the iron lingers, it'll burn the lining, because it's a very delicate, velvety fabric. It didn't work out for me, but my two brothers-in-law were pressers, back then. Later on, they went on to different jobs, to different things.

HM: Was it common for a husband and a wife, both, to work?

TO: No. It was a different world than it is now. For the most part, in the Puerto Rican culture -- and I address myself to our culture -- the woman stayed home; the woman did not work. Let me rephrase that. There were some women who worked, but it was more common for the woman to stay home with the children. My mother never worked. My sisters did not work after they got married, until their children were four, five, six years old. And up to this day, that's something that's observed in the Puerto Rican culture, where we will not allow for our little children -- our babies -- to be away from the immediate family at such

an early age. Now it's easier. There are a lot of day-care centers. Back then there were no day-care centers here. Back then some women made a business of minding children. My mother has many foster, or pseudo-grandchildren, to this day, that I consider my brothers, my sisters, my cousins - we were not all blood-related, but my mother helped raise them.

But back then I would say, for the most part, the man was the breadwinner. Back in 1965 I think the minimum wage may have been \$1.25 or \$1.50. I think that's what it was. I remember in the '50s -- I remember when the \$1.00 minimum wage came aboard, and that was probably around 1955 or '56, I think. But in 1965 -- it must have been \$1.50 by then.

HM: And people survived with one salary, or was it rough?

TO: Sure. Because I would say that everything is relative. People could survive on one salary because the rents were much, much cheaper. You had a choice of moving from one place to another very easily, without having to go to a real-estate office, and pay a finder's fee, like now. In fact, I only recall one rental agency

here in Hoboken. It was right across from City Hall, over where Carlo's, the bakery, is today. (Back then it was Schoning's Bakery.) Right around that area. It was called McQueen's, and maybe that was the only real-estate agency in Hoboken back then. Normally, if you were looking for an apartment, all you had to do was walk down the street - or buy the paper. The paper was loaded with ads for apartments, and you would look at windows and you would see "For Rent" signs, all by the owner.

So rents were cheaper. Food, of course, was much, much cheaper, and I guess every article, clothing and all that, was much cheaper. I think it was easier for people to deal with day-to-day existence than it is now for a young couple, who is planning to get married. I think the cost-of-living is not equivalent to the cost-of-living increases, that people get, is not really equivalent to the rise in prices. That's how expensive it is, nowadays.

HM: Did you see a change -- In your first interview you talked about being the second Puerto Rican family to come here--

TO: -- up on 12th and Willow, yes.

HM: Did you see a change in things like the markets -- foods that might be available -- as the community got bigger?

TO: Back then, the supermarkets, themselves, did not carry as many Hispanic or Latin American items as they do now. For example, if you go to Shoprite now, there's an aisle there -- they call it Goya, and they have all the Goya products, the rice and beans, the coffee, spices, some juices, sodas, and that sort of stuff. Back then, beginning with the mid-'50s, a lot of bodegas, or local Hispanic grocery stores, run by the husband and wife (Mom and Pop stores) flourished here in Hoboken. So we had a lot of bodegas in Hoboken. They were the ones that carried the Hispanic foods, and they were really unique in the sense that they gave credit to the clients. So if you did not have the money, you could go to the bodega and tell the guy, "I want to do a '*compra*.'" I want to do grocery shopping. I want to do a "*compra*" for my family. "I get paid on Friday; Friday I'll come bring you the money." They would establish credit that way, and the owner of the bodega would allow them to do shopping -- \$15-\$20-\$30, whatever. He would jot it in a little notebook that he had, and then the person would come the next week

and say, "You know, I want to pay you." A lot of times they may not have all the money, so they would pay half. The bodega wasn't a money-lender and he wasn't -- what's the word I want to use? He wasn't a usurer.

HM: He took no interest.

TO: No interest. So he was really a friendly guy. He may have charged a couple cents more per item, but that still happens when you go to a regular grocery store or regular deli, vs. a supermarket. You get better rates in the supermarket. But he was there for the people. That always impressed me, because they were always open to helping the neighbors.

HM: Did they cash checks and things like that, too?

TO: Yes, they did. I don't recall too many check-cashing places, by the way, then. Those were things that came later on, I guess, I don't know when -- the '70s? But we didn't have that type of business then. (Back then, however, I recall a tavern on 14th Street--the Traffic Lounge--where the owner--they called him "Tex"--cashed checks

on paydays for a couple of dollars.) There were a lot of things that were not available to the general public then.

HM: Now I had heard that it was really hard to get a mortgage in Hoboken; that Hoboken was red-lined; that you really couldn't get a mortgage. Did your family face that?

TO: I'm not familiar with that. My family never attempted to buy property -- we never had the means. By then I was married, by the way, in the '60s. I got married in '63. My son was born in '65, my daughter was born in '64, so I had two children then. My other daughter would not be born until 1974, ten years later. But at that time, we didn't have the means, my wife and I, or anybody in my family, and we were not in the market of looking around for a house or anything like that. Certainly, my mother and father before us did not. My father was -- I think I said in my oral interview -- he was just a common, average guy, trying to make ends meet for his family.

HM: So when did you buy your house?

TO: In 1976. So it was around thirteen years later that my sister Carmen, and my brother-in-law Angel, my wife Margie, and I bought our house.

HM: So that was already over, the whole red-lining.

TO: I don't know. See, I never heard that, that Hoboken was red-lined. By the way, this is common with Hispanic people -- and I'm going to say Puerto Rican people, again -- Puerto Rican people are always averse to buying property here, because they say the property is never yours. What they mean by that is that you have to pay taxes on the property. In Puerto Rico, if you own a house, if you own property and you live on it, you don't pay anything. And even if you don't live in it, the taxes you're going to pay are ridiculously low. Like right now, the place I have over there in Puerto Rico, the condo I have there, if it was here the taxes would be a lot of money. There, I'm paying around \$700 a year, because I don't live there.

HM: Is it more than that, too, though? Is it sort of where your heart is? That you're going to buy land "at home," where you think your home is?

TO: I think here -- The comment I always heard from people was "Your house is never your house, here. That's why I don't buy." I think they short-change themselves, people, by not buying, and realizing that property really, I don't think, depreciates over the years. Certainly, not in Hoboken's case.

HM: Not at all.

TO: We paid \$37,000 for a house that we can sell for, I think, close to \$1 million today. You know what I'm saying? The question is, where are you going to go, anyway. Where would we go? If I sold my house here, I certainly wouldn't hang around here. I'd go to parts unknown. But I don't want to do that.

HM: Right. It's the same thing. The money -
- it's not a real amount to us, because it doesn't equate to something you want to happen.

TO: And the thing is, everything is so overrated and overpriced, and if we sold this house here, now, what am I gonna do if I want to stay in the area? Overpay for something else?

HM: But you do have to live somewhere.

TO: Yes.

HM: In terms of one of the things you mentioned in your first chapbook, first interview, were some cultural things. Well, first of all, I know that you were one of the organizers of Puerto Rican festivals in town. And just a representation of that culture -- I wonder if you could talk about that more, to give people a sense of what used to be.

TO: Well, back then, like I said, there were more neighborhoods, where people of one culture or, I think, one background, lived. So that one particular block basically adhered to or kept their tradition and culture. At times resisted assimilation into the other American culture here. So if you talk to a lot of people who grew up in the era or years that I grew up in, or even back in the

'60s, the language on the block, the main language was Spanish. Because we were basically most of the first generation of people who came over to that area, and we still held our customs. Now it's different. My children do not speak Spanish, unfortunately, as fluently as I do. My children cannot relate at all to those days. I talk, and I think they see everything like black and white. (Much in that same way that we feel when we see a silent, black and white film of the early 1900s.) I don't think they relate at all. But back then, yes, people kept their customs, their language, their music, their basic pride. People always talked about going back to the *isla* or island.

Nowadays, again, that's not true. Nowadays, people like my children, we refer to them as Nuyoricans. By the way, there was a club here in Hoboken, on 3rd and Madison, called the Jerseyricans -- and the founder is still around. The guy still lives there, I think. He had a club in the basement of the building (it's like a ground-floor, actually), and it was called "The Jerseyricans," and people would go there to play cards and dominoes. Generally, Latinos refer to us by that term. In California, people refer to the Mexicans as Chicanos; we refer to the Puerto Ricans who live here, who have been here a long time, as Nuyoricans.

HM: Assimilated.

TO: Well, as Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. for a long time. When I go back to Puerto Rico people say of me, "He's from outside." They say, "El es 'de afuera,'" which means "He's from outside. He's from the other side." Even though my heart, my love for Puerto Rico is so great. I could live there all the time.

HM: Does that hurt?

TO: It hurts.

HM: Because it's almost like you're neither accepted here nor there.

TO: Puerto Ricans have a dilemma. We come here to this country and we're not really accepted. (Although we are U.S. citizens by birth and serve in the armed forces.) I really understand that all other minorities have gone through this, throughout the years. I think the biggest example is the black man, who's a native of this country, who cannot really relate to Africa, no

matter how many Back-to-Africa movements there may be.

(African Americans are not totally accepted by America's white society.) We're American citizens by birth, also, compared to, say, Italians, or Irish, or Germans. We come here and we're not really accepted. Even if you express your national pride and all that, but when we go back to Puerto Rico, we're not totally accepted there, either, because people will say, "You really can't relate," and it's true. I don't relate to the politics in Puerto Rico as I do to the politics here. I wasn't there, to live through what people have lived through for the fifty-something years that we have lived here.

So it's frustrating. So in Puerto Rico, I don't tell everybody that I'm from here, and since I speak Spanish fluently, and I know enough of the culture there and everything, I pass. You know what I'm saying?

HM: Yes, I do.

TO: I pass. People are sometimes surprised when they hear me talk English fluently to somebody.

HM: But you know, it's an interesting dilemma. And I wonder, just in terms of establishing festivals here, if that gave you solace in a way.

TO: Oh, yes. Well, the festival I was involved in -- I'm still involved in the Puerto Rican Cultural Festival, which, by the way, I don't know if it's going to be carried out this year.

HM: Why?

TO: Because the interest has waned.

HM: There's a diminished population.

TO: Diminished population, and you get a lot of lip service from politicians here, from the Hispanic politicians. But as far as involvement -- First of all, they're younger people; they don't really relate that much. And if they do it, they do it half-heartedly, only to give the impression that they're totally involved. At one point, back in 1994, I think it was -- this year would be our twelfth year -- when we first started the Puerto Rican Cultural Festival we had forty active members on the PRCC.

By the way, that wasn't the first Puerto Rican Cultural Festival in Hoboken. There were other ones. There were various others throughout the years.

There was a man by the name of Juan Garcia, and Juan Garcia was a very controversial person here, because he had been involved -- Juan Garcia was a guy who had been a drug addict, a radical, and he, along with a couple other people who are still around -- Ron Hine, Louis Lopez, Alex Rodriguez, Willie Rolon, formed a community group known as *La Coalicion* or The Coalition.

HM: Oh, is this -- are you talking about all the uprisings in '71?

TO: In the early 1970s.

HM: Now why was Ron involved in this?

TO: Ron sympathized with social problems within the Hispanic community in Hoboken.

HM: He was an organizer?

TO: He was supportive of the group there -
Juan Garcia, Luis Lopez, Alex Rodriquez, Willie Rolon,
Connie Flores.

HM: Yes. And the Duroys?

TO: No. The DuRoys were a class apart. At
that time they were not yet involved in community affairs.
Anyway -- Juan Garcia organized a group (this was later,
not in the '60s), but Juan Garcia organized a group called
CUNA. (Citizens United for New Action. CUNA means "cradle"
in Spanish.) Do you remember CUNA? CUNA was just a couple
blocks up from you, on Eighth and Willow.

HM: I remember their office.

TO: Between Ninth and Tenth and Willow.

HM: But they weren't doing anything when I
came.

TO: No, no, they weren't. It was a
controversial organization. Some people thought that Juan
Garcia was really taking advantage of, being Puerto Rican,

to get government funds -- but he did things that were worthy.

HM: By helping people?

TO: Yes, he helped people. He helped people to a certain degree. CUNA was not a government agency. Juan had a modus operandi that was different, totally different. They saw him as more radical. He was always a guy who was quick to threaten uprising; to threaten demonstrations; to threaten boycotts; to threaten politicians with rallying people against them.

HM: And he was successful at doing that.

TO: With some people. He had some followers. At the same time, he had certain allegiances with certain political figures that cast a shadow of doubt on that. I remember he always gave the impression he was an anti-Cappiello person, but he and Cappiello were actually good friends, and Steve referred to Juan as "Johnny" and all that, and he referred to Steve Cappiello as "Stevie."

I'm digressing, I'm going off on a tangent, but with Juan Garcia, I remember at times he would advise

people to do things that I thought were totally off the wall. Like I remember during Tom Vezzetti's campaign against Cappiello and Juan Garcia was telling people, "Don't go out and vote at all. Because this way we'll force them to create another election and all that." And I was saying to people, "Don't you dare not vote. Vote against Cappiello, but vote. If you don't vote, it's a vote for Cappiello. But if you go directly and vote against Cappiello, it's a vote for Vezzetti."

HM: And what was that about? Was that him secretly supporting Cappiello?

TO: I think so. I think so, yes.

HM: And where is he now?

TO: He died. He passed away.

HM: Now you mentioned him because -- ?

TO: -- because he was one of the organizers of different block parties, and a couple of festivals -- not to the magnitude of the festivals we've seen in recent

years. Frankly, I didn't like the festivals, because at that time, to me, it was just an opportunity for a group of people to get out there, stand there with beers in their hands -- cans of beer -- listening to salsa, and there was nothing else behind it. There was no purpose to them, there was no lesson to be learned by young people. There was no mention of culture. It was just a get-together for a group of people to basically have a good time, in that sense, but really no purpose behind it.

But he did organize that sort of stuff and a segment of the community attended. He did block parties. I remember block parties between Eighth and Ninth and Willow. He was between Ninth and Tenth, at 918 Willow. But he used to do the next block over. That was a Hispanic block, from 800 to 816, the same side as you live. They would do a party there, a rally. He also, was, like I say, kind of political, slick in that way. But I think he did some things that the Puerto Rican community liked -- he had good intentions.

HM: Well, you talked about the club where people met and played cards. People had their own way of keeping the culture, too.

TO: Oh, yes.

HM: I've heard that there were really famous guitarists in Hoboken, who played -- is it "cuatro?"

TO: Yes. There were people, musicians here. In fact, one was killed last year. He was like a troubadour. His name was Juan Cumba. This was a guy who sang "*musica tipica*" or grassroots Puerto Rican country music. People like Juan Cumba were troubadours who improvised. They would make up the words to a song on the spot.

HM: That's a whole oral tradition.

TO: Yes. In Puerto Rico, the "jibaro" music, which is the music of the country, has nature and country in its lyrics. Remember in *Deliverance*, the dueling banjos? Well, in Puerto Rico, these would be the dueling singers, and they'll go back and forth, and make up the stuff at that moment that they're singing. And people like Juan Cumba, and the others here, were people who also helped to keep that culture alive.

A lot of these guys, by the way (you mentioned the clubs), loved to play cards and dominoes on the weekends.

HM: That's some of the footage that Nora [Jacobson] has in *Delivered Vacant* -- these guys playing dominoes -- which I remember seeing.

TO: Yeah. And it wasn't different from the Italian clubs. These were clubs where people played for money. They were illegal. The gambling that went on --

HM: How many card games were there?

TO: Although it was illegal to gamble, there were several bars and clubs through the city where card games--poker, rummy, blackjack, banker-broker, etc.-- were played on weekends. Dice and dominoes were very popular too.

HM: With the mayor, too.

TO: Exactly. Well, you saw him in *Delivered Vacant* [playing cards.] That's my favorite part, where they put the quote there: "The Mayor."

HM: That's right. He's got a cigar in his mouth.

TO: That's so funny.

But yes, back then, the Puerto Rican presence here was much more vibrant. We felt, and often behaved, as Puerto Ricans -- I think it may have been offensive to other races, and it may have been alien to people from other backgrounds here. I don't think it did much for our image here, because we were not seen as "cute" anymore, and I think I said that in my first interview.

HM: Yes, you did.

TO: At first -- and I guess that happens with all ethnic backgrounds. You "invade," or go into a neighborhood, and they don't see you as a threat, because you're not taking up a lot of space; you're not taking up jobs; you're not taking up apartments. So at that moment, you might be "cute." Later on, you become a threat, and

that's where everything really goes down the drain, when the ghetto begins, and when people start fleeing the neighborhood.

I believe ghettos are created by slumlords and lack of tenant selection. However, most people blame the people in the ghetto without making the distinction between the good and the bad tenants.

HM: Also -- and CUNA comes in to this -- people demanded political involvement --

TO: Exactly. That was our downfall here, in Hoboken; that people wanted involvement, and the politicians took advantage of that, to the hilt. You had an example in 1973, when Steve Cappiello got in. Frank DuRoy ran for mayor also. He ran for mayor with a Puerto Rican ticket. He got wiped out. He made a good showing with the Hispanics, but he got beat. Four years later, he could have run again and done much better, but he stepped aside. Four years later he came back to run, not as a candidate for mayor, but to run as a councilman at large, with Anthony Romano -- know what I'm saying? -- which was a big let-down. For me, it was the biggest let-down.

HM: I'm just thinking -- there were the uprisings in 1971, and a lot of it was about that; about being disenfranchised, and not having any say in city politics. So two years later, he runs, people put their hopes in that, and then he gets co-opted.

TO: Exactly.

HM: And why is that? Is it because the other machinery is so much bigger?

TO: Back then, for somebody to be a candidate was a big, big deal. So with Frank DuRoy, that was like the first time a Puerto Rican attempted to infiltrate city government as an elected official.

HM: Did he lack money to get his point across? There were a lot of people behind him, probably -- so how did he organize? Maybe he didn't need money then.

TO: No, he didn't. Back then -- how can I put this? The Puerto Ricans who were here, going back to DePascale (now this is before Cappiello) -- If we go back to DePascale, at one point there was a position here in

City Hall -- in Spanish they call it "vice alcalde," which means vice-mayor, like sub-mayor, or assistant mayor. It was a position that was created solely for Hispanics. The first vice mayor was a guy by the name of Pedro Milan, a good man, real nice guy -- he was a friend of mine. He died in Puerto Rico. He was married to a woman who worked for CDA (Community Development Agency), by the name of Vidalina Milan.

So with Pedro Milan, this position was created, and they had a little election among the Puerto Rican people to elect a vice mayor, and he won.

HM: And when was this? In the '50s? Sixties?

TO: This was in the '60s, yes, late '60s. This was before Cappiello. DePascale. This was after Grogan. Anyway, what happened was, the politicians, I think, played this to the hilt -- the desire of the Puerto Ricans to be involved in city government, to have a say and all that. We were talking about this the other day. If Steve Cappiello had a particular Hispanic candidate that he wanted to run with him, the other person, who was running against Steve Cappiello, would get (and it still happens)

another Hispanic, because everybody wanted to give the impression "I am not anti-Hispanic." And a guy like Juan Garcia would also be a force behind that, because he would point out any candidate for mayor that did not hire a Hispanic on his ticket and label him a racist. Cappiello had Ed DuRoy (Frank's brother) at one point. This was later, in the '80s, let's say. Cappiello had Ed DuRoy, and a guy like Juan Garcia would say, "Vezetti doesn't have a Hispanic. Vezetti doesn't have a Hispanic there. Vezetti's anti-Puerto Rican." And that happened, going back to the early '70s, also. It was a divide and conquer thing.

We would fight -- the Puerto Ricans would fight against each other, hate each other. Some, to this day -- In the meantime, the politicians all got together, after the election was over, and they would kiss and make up, mend fences. There would be re-hirings and all that -- the same things that go on now.

HM: I don't want to harp on it, but I just want to get some information. Can you tell me what happened in 1971, with the uprisings? Because Cappiello also made a display --

TO: Oh, yes. And so did Jim Farina and the Young Dems, and all that.

My understanding was that the police arrested a guy who had had an altercation with a jeweler on First Street, down by Jefferson, that area there. They had an altercation, the jeweler and the guy. The police were called. The guy was Puerto Rican, they took him out, and supposedly they beat him and arrested him. People witnessed this, and it got to the Coalicion, on First. The Coalicion was right across from Apicella's Fish Market, by the way, on the north side of First Street. People went to City Hall and demanded he be released. He wasn't. Then people started rallying other people around it, and one thing led to another, and it led to the "famous" Puerto Rican riots of Hoboken -- It certainly wasn't like Newark. This was something that happened right along First Street, and some windows in shops were broken and all that. But I think it was something that had never happened here. I understand some longshoremen and Steve Cappiello rallied around that, and they marched down First Street, en masse, with clubs and everything. There were some cops that joined in on that march and also Jim Farina and the Young Dems.

As a matter of fact, there's a policeman, Felix Rivera, a Puerto Rican, who left the force. He left

the force. Felix lives in (maybe at one point you can talk to him) -- he lives in Bayonne. He's my compadre; his son is my god-son. We haven't been in touch for a while, not much anymore, but he lives in Bayonne. But Felix left the police force after the riots. He took off his police shirt, I understand, and just left, in solidarity with the Puerto Rican community, and went out to work for -- he retired from the Port Authority -- the New York/New Jersey Port Authority.

HM: Because of that incident?

TO: Because of that, yes.

RF: Who was police chief at the time?
Would it have been Crimmins?

TO: I don't think it was George Crimmins,
Sr.

RF: He was there a long time.

TO: I think it was Crimmins. And the fire
chief -- I remember his name -- Carmody.

HM: Did it make things worse, or did things get better? After that.

TO: I think it created a division even among the Puerto Ricans themselves. Because there were people who just wanted things to be normal and quiet. Within our people, the people saw the rioters as malcontents; as people who were "communists" as some ignorantly labeled them.

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

TO: To some Puerto Ricans, those people were malcontents and rowdy, and those people were setting us back some notches, or steps back.

HM: Were the police more difficult? Did it make things --

TO: Back then, police were -- I don't know how the police are now, really, but back then I think there was almost a zero tolerance for the Puerto Ricans, as far as the police were concerned. I'll give you an example of that, like an analogy. I was at a barbershop last year, on Tenth and Willow (I was getting a haircut), the day the St.

Patrick's Day parade was held by the city, that Saturday. Now this was before the actual St. Patrick's Day, a couple of weeks before that. But I was there, and there's a bar right next to the barbershop there, and the bar was packed, as bars in Hoboken often are. People elbow to elbow, people falling out into the street. All these people are there. The ones out on the street had beer, cans and bottles, and women kept coming into the barbershop and saying, "You have a bathroom?" And the barber would say: "Okay, you can use the bathroom." He let them. The barber is a Cuban man, who is my friend. His name is Jesus. So I said, "Jesus, imagine if the opposite were true. Imagine if that bar was a Puerto Rican bar, back in the '70s and the '80s, and this barbershop owner was Irish. Can you imagine what would be going on?" He said, "There would be clubbing going on"-- meaning the police would be there swinging their clubs-- because the police had no tolerance for Puerto Ricans drinking on the sidewalk.

 If the police saw a guy sitting on a stoop, on their stoop, in the building they lived in or owned, let's say sitting on the stoop with a beer, no shirt -- in the summer, because it's really hot up there, sweltering up there in their apartments -- and a cop would go by, he would take the beer, he would hit the guy, he would lock up

the person. They had no tolerance. Now it's different. Now they'll bend over backwards for stuff like that. Because now they cater to a different class of residents.

HM: Well, for white, twenty-year-olds.

TO: Yes. Well, like I say, it's a different world. But those were the things that went on.

So, concerning the police, yes, I would say the police were -- I remember there was a cop on my block, not a bad guy. Later on he mellowed, as an older man, but he was a real bastard when he was there. I don't know if I should mention his name.

HM: No, you don't need to.

TO: But this was a guy who, if he saw you standing, just standing there, talking like you and I are, and he walked by, swinging his club, he would say -- and he sounded to me like a Humphrey Bogart type -- "Hey, kids. I'm goin' 'round the corner, and if I come back and catch you hear, I'm gonna whack you 'cross your legs." And he would. He would hit you with the club, if he caught you

when he came back. He would call you names -- "You little bastard!" So that's the way things were.

HM: Now when I came here, in 1979, probably -- and I think, when I look at numbers -- about 30% of the population was Hispanic.

TO: I would say yes. I would say up until that time -- When you came, you probably came around the time when the fires were beginning.

HM: That's what I want to talk about. So how were you involved in combating that? Or helping people?

TO: Well, at that time I was already working for the city. I was working for the city.

HM: Do you want to go back to when you first started to work for the city?

TO: Yes. In the mid-'60s, I was a shipping clerk for a typewriter company in New York -- Morse Typewriter Company, on Canal Street. I had gotten married in 1963, and I got laid off. My wife and I, the first year

we were married, we lived in Brooklyn. (Margie lived there before we married.) This all happened because of the closeness with my in-laws had with their youngest daughter. Not wanting her to move too far away. I remember my father-in-law saying, "That's too far," when we were looking for an apartment.

HM: There was water in between!

TO: No. What he meant was that the apartment was ten subway stops away from their home. "That's too far." They really loved and were concerned for Margie.

HM: Well, they wanted to see their grandchildren.

TO: Yeah. This was when we were looking for an apartment, and were going to get married.

Anyway, I got laid off from Morse Typewriter Company, and I told my wife, I said, "Let's go back to Hoboken," and I looked for work here. I got work in a place called Corning embroidery -- I've forgotten. It was Corning, and they were on 13th and Park. There's a condo, a

brand-new condo, there now. I was a billing clerk. I did billing, by hand. From there I applied, and I got a job at Bali Bra as a shipping clerk. This was, as I say, in the middle of the '60s, and a friend of mine who, later on, became a policeman -- he's in Florida, Mario Rivera-- worked with the Jersey Regional Drug-Abuse Agency. The Regional Drug-Abuse Agency was a rehabilitation center for drug addicts who were using heroin. That was the drug that prevailed then, a big thing. So he asked me, "Tom, I know you like to work with people." I always was a translator for people. People would ask me, "Do you want to go here with me and help me out with this? Because I don't understand it." He knew that, so he said, "Why don't you apply where I work?"

So I did, and they had other outreach centers throughout Hudson County. Other centers are in Bayonne, Union City, Wehauken, Hoboken, Jersey City had a few.

HM: And the problem in Hoboken, was it noticeable? Were people aware of it?

TO: Oh, yeah. I think, all around, Hudson County had a problem that existed. They had outreach

centers in all these towns, and they had a residential facility where Liberty Park is right now. It was called Liberty Village, and their outreach centers were called Liberty House (*Casa Libertad* to Latinos) -- Liberty House #1, Liberty House #2 -- I applied, and I had to go through a training. I had to spend two weeks at their residential facility -- I didn't do drugs or anything like that. That was one of the raps against me. Addicts used to say, "How can you counsel me, when you never did drugs?" My answer to that was: "I don't want to be like you; you've got to be like me."

Anyway, I worked out here for Liberty Village as a counselor, and later on, within two years, I became like the director of the center here, the outreach center here. Then Patrick House -- Have you heard of Patrick House? Patrick House was a methadone-distribution clinic, a big clinic. It took over Liberty Village and all that, and they started using methadone.

HM: Was that because federal funding went into that?

TO: Yes. The federal funding, I think -- Some of it was from "SLEPA" -- the State Law Enforcement

"Something" Agency. Anyway, they brought methadone in, not only to detox, but to maintain people on methadone. And when the methadone-maintenance program came in, I said, "I'm not going to do this anymore, because you can't really counsel somebody who's high on methadone. And methadone, basically is just another manmade drug -- it's like switching cigarettes, from Camel's to Kool's. So no difference.

So the city was in the midst of putting together a drug-education/prevention program, which was dealing with kids who were experimenting with drugs -- high-school kids, or kids in junior high school; or, generally, teens, you know -- but it didn't have anything to do with hard use. The program was geared to kids who were using pot and stuff like that. I applied, and I got a job with them. Then a year later that program folded, and the Model Cities Program kept me in the city, doing relocation. That's around the time of Applied Housing. Now we're into the early '70s -- '70-'71 -- when Applied Housing took over 12th Street and Willow Avenue, the block that I grew up in.

I worked with Model Cities at the tail end of it, then it became CDA, the Community Development Agency. There were a couple of people from City Hall who still work there.

Nancy Scanclepore. Joanne Buonarota. Do you know Joanne?
She's the secretary upstairs? Nice lady. Beautiful.

HM: We were talking about location; how you came to work for the city, because we were talking about the fires, but your work, your connection to the city, started more with --

TO: At that time, 1971, the city had a massive plan to bring the city to what it is now, I guess. I don't know if they envisioned back then what it's become.

HM: Probably just chasing the federal money.

TO: Yeah. You know. But I remember the master plan. I remember the first ads, basically selling Hoboken to the world by saying, "You live in New York and you have problems with parking, and problems with crime. Your rents are high. When you look out your window, you're seeing the Jersey shore. Why not move to Hoboken? There's plenty of parking. The rents are cheap." And they were really cheap, and there was plenty of parking. "Crime, there's relatively none, and when you look out your window

you're going to see one of the most famous sights in the world -- the Manhattan skyline." That's how they began. I remember that, the master plan. For some of us who worked there, it was something we couldn't conceive. For me it was scary: "Oh, all these people are going to be moving here?"

Then the fires began, the gentrification began after that, but that was some years down the road. Because I recall that in the late '70s-early '80s was when the fires really took their toll here on people's lives, in many different ways.

HM: And before the fires -- and you were relocating people -- that was Model Cities, some of that, and the Applied Housing you were putting in --

TO: At that time, to be relocated?

HM: Yes.

TO: Oh, yeah, it was "different," sure. I would say people were. Because what happened was (and this was before the fire, or any threat to life) --

HM: And before condominiums.

TO: -- and before condos and all that. Back then (and it began with Twelfth and Willow), somehow or other the city got a developer who had the good fortune -- and it was Applied Housing -- to fall into something like that. There was Walter Barry. Joe wasn't even around.

HM: He was still in law school, probably.

TO: Right. There was Walter Barry and his partner George -- I've forgotten his name -- and they had a relocation officer -- they had a tenants organizer -- somebody by the name of Harry Johnson. Anyway, they came up with a new concept of housing here, different than the projects, different than public housing, where you would have a situation where people of different income levels would live together -- not only low-income people, or very low-income people; rather, you would get low-income people, middle-income people, maybe high-middle-income people, living in the same-- and they brought along tenant selection, which was something that was non-existent, like in the projects. I remember when the projects were a beautiful place to live in.

But I think it's not the people, but, rather, the lack of tenant selection. Because along with all ethnic backgrounds, you've got good people and you've got people who cause problems. And if you don't select, then you're going to have problems in the buildings. So you have to select. You have to. You can't bring somebody in who's got a criminal history, and allow them to run rampant through the building. So Applied Housing did bring that.

Anyway, back then, they came and perused the area at Twelfth and Willow, and they said to the people, "You have to move. We're going to renovate this. You have to move. But we're not just going to put you out. There are benefits to this," and there were three options. One was, "We'll give you \$4,000," which was a big chunk of money then.

HM: It was huge.

TO: Back then, a lot of money. "We'll give you \$4,000 -- \$1,000 a year, not a lump sum. We'll give it to you as a rent differential. Right now you're paying \$50-\$60 here; you can get up to \$1,000 a year for four years, if you take an apartment. You can get \$1,000 a year if you rent an apartment that's going to be \$83 more a month than

what you pay here. So if you're paying \$50, you can get an apartment for \$133, you're going to get \$1,000 a year.

There were certain requirements that must be met. The apartment must be large enough to accommodate the family. The apartment must be steam-heated -- centrally heated. The apartment must be in good condition, and large enough for your family."

HM: Was that hard, the steam-heat thing? In Hoboken? Because there were so many cold-water flats. When I came to Hoboken, there were tons of them.

TO: That would not qualify, unless the apartment was centrally heated. Centrally heated. You couldn't have space heaters in the rooms.

And that was good. It was a good plan. People, by that time, at Twelfth and Willow, on that block, were living in substandard apartments. The owner had basically walked away from the building. There had been no tenant selection there, either, so it was a combination of both, and the block had really deteriorated. However, in Latin American countries we tend to deal with what life brings us with humor. We use tongue-in-cheek names for areas that are blighted--for areas in the world that are

having a lot of problems. So among Latinos, the neighborhood at Twelfth and Willow became known as "Korea." All Hispanics in Hoboken knew where "Korea" was in this city. I never heard other groups call it that.

By the way, in Puerto Rico there's a town called Cataño, and it had a ward that was really, really rough, and they called it "Vietnam." If you look at the map of Puerto Rico now, right around the San Juan area, you're going to see "Vietnam." I said to myself, "I wonder how people like Americans, when they come here, or see the map, What do they think Vietnam is? So anyway, they called it that. "Oh, that's worse than Korea."

So anyway, people offered these options. The first option was the \$4,000 -- \$1,000 a year. The second option was, "We'll give you up to \$4,000 for a down payment on a house." Not too many people took advantage of that, because most people weren't credit-worthy, people didn't have the money, and all that. It was really a big thing, for anybody to own a house then. The third option was to return to the building after it was rehabbed. Keep in mind that most of the families who lived there were in need. They may have been living in two-bedroom apartments (because all of the 135 apartments were two-bedrooms, on Twelfth Street). There were nine buildings, fifteen

apartments each, two to the front and one to the rear, two bedrooms. Keep in mind that some people who lived there, according to federal guidelines -- because you had to meet the federal guidelines -- would need three or four bedrooms.

So with Applied Housing, a compromise was reached, and Applied Housing said, "We'll build X-amount of three-bedroom units. We'll build a couple of four-bedroom units, and the rest would be one- and two-bedroom units. Okay. So that in itself prevented a lot of people from returning even if they wanted to.

HM: And where did people go? Jersey City?

TO: No. So what happened was -- And it was a good concept, because you figure you're living in squalor. You're living in a bad situation. You're living in a situation where you're overcrowded. So here you have an opportunity, for at least four years, to get help with your rent, to improve your quality of life. "I have two bedrooms now, I've got four kids. I can get a three-bedroom, better conditions, steam-heated and all that, and it's not gonna cost me more than what I pay now. I'm paying \$50 now. I'll

still pay my \$50, the government's gonna give me \$83 a month for four years. Every year I'll get \$1,000."

And that was good. The first group of people that moved out and that was really good.

HM: There's a photograph that Carolyn Carlson took of you with Mr. Romero.

TO: With Mr. Romero. Francisco. Yes. I loved him. He was a great guy, Francisco. I have his picture in Puerto Rico. I took him there.

HM: Because you said he always wanted to go.

TO: He always wanted to go there.

HM: So is that the process of him --

TO: That was the process. He lived on Ninth and Clinton. That came a few years later. He lived across from the park there.

Anyway. That was the process. The situation would be that the following year -- Let's say you moved

January 1st of this year. Next year, on January 1st, myself or somebody else who worked for that relocation office would come to your apartment, do an inspection of the apartment you moved into. Now you were allowed to move from that apartment to another apartment, but it had to be an apartment that met with the program regulations. The size of the apartment, steam-heated, good condition, etc. And if everything was okay, if you didn't go back to some slum or something, you would get another \$1,000. Sounds ideal, eh?

So what happens? All of a sudden we get word that the government -- I don't know exactly how it came about - that the government determined that it was anti-constitutional to hold back money from these tenants who were relocated, so that you could not hold them to \$1,000 a year; the payments had to be paid out in a lump sum. Lump sum. And what happened was -- It was a rent differential thing, so everybody didn't get \$4,000. Some people got \$2,500, some people got \$3,000, depending on what the rent differential was. As soon as it became lump-sum, the program went down the drain. Because then people became slick. The famous word was "qualifying." People would come to the office and say, "If I want to qualify for the \$4,000, how much is the maximum my rent should be?" I would reply: "Well, it should be around \$83 more than your

present rent. What is your income?" I would ask them. I would just explain to them: "This is for rent differential. It's not a question of qualifying for the most money. Because you're going to have to use this for your rent." But then, by giving the lump sum, you took away the restriction that you have to stay in a certain place, living in a certain mode, year by year by year. So people would come to the office and they would ask [about the maximum amount of rent differential available to them], and you would tell them, and a day later they would come and they would say, "I got a beautiful apartment in West New York." I'd say, "West New York? Why?" And they would say, "Because the schools here in Hoboken, I don't like them anymore. I'm not satisfied. I want to go up there." Or, "I have a relative who lives in West New York. My sister's up there. I want to move out there. I couldn't find an apartment like that in Hoboken, so I found it out there. Could you come and inspect it and okay it? See if it's okay?"

"Sure." So I would go with the person, and when you got there you would see the apartment. The apartment would be in good shape. It would be steam-heated, the rent would be within the guidelines to qualify them for \$4,000, and it would be large enough to accommodate the

family. Fine. So you would come back to the office, tell the director, the director would write out a check, once you okayed it, for \$500 for moving expenses (the total benefit amount wasn't just \$4,000, it was \$4,500, actually). It was \$500 for moving expenses, and that was a lot of money to move.

HM: That's a lot of money to move, too --

TO: -- back then, yeah. And people used to do their own moving. But you gave them \$500, and you gave them the \$4,000. A month later they would come -- one month later -- they would return to the office, and it was like Christmas. On that date, a month later, you would have all these checks, for that whole previous month, and you would be handing out \$4,000 checks to everybody. Not to every, single individual. Some people did it according to their economic means. But, anyway, the money was there.

HM: But it destroyed the community.

TO: It certainly brought out some people's greed.

So what do you think would happen later? That person who went to West New York with his family? I would be walking on the street, and I would see him here, in Hoboken. I would say, "Hey, how you doin'? Visiting?" "Nah, I couldn't take that apartment in West New York. I couldn't take the change. My sister told me the schools are worse than here. So I moved back to Hoboken." "Oh. Where do you live?" "I live on Fifth and Monroe," some slum, paying \$60, \$70, \$50 -- the same amount of money [they had previously paid] so the money was pocketed. And the whole program went down the drain. It was not beneficial to 90% of the people. No matter how we complained -- I used to talk to people and say, "You know, this has to be changed. This is not helping the people."

So the whole purpose of the relocation program was defeated and most people did not improve their quality of living. But back then, there were so many apartments available in Hoboken, and since there were no restrictions, they wouldn't get into a steam-heated apartment, paying \$30-40 more, or half the money they had been given. No. They would get the cheapest apartment, and just fall back in the same place. So we had situations, people who were relocated throughout the years three times.

HM: For you, it must have been so frustrating, just trying to remedy the situation.

TO: It was very, very frustrating. I know people who got \$4,500, \$4,500 and \$7,500, because they moved into a place where there was private relocation, by the owner. It wasn't the government taking over. In fact, Murray Connell, the guy who owned 11th and Willow, across from me there? Murray Connell paid the last remaining seventeen tenants -- and that's in *Delivered Vacant*, that group that met, the women that are there, those people got \$7,500. And among those people there were a couple who had been relocated twice before that. So it was a windfall for some people. Some people got, let's say, \$9,000, \$16,500 -- no. It was more. Yes, \$16,500. (In subsequent years, some people have received up to \$40,000 to relocate.)

HM: But it doesn't do anything for the community. It doesn't create stability. The thing that people don't understand now, coming in, about Applied, was how it stabilized the community.

TO: Exactly. Yes. So, frankly, if it hadn't been for Applied Housing --

HM: There'd be no Hispanic community in Hoboken then.

TO: No, no. Never mind that. A lot of the people who are in Applied Housing now, a lot, were not original Hoboken residents.

HM: I'm sure.

TO: They came from Union City. They came from Floral Park. They came from different places, where Applied Housing was, and then they were dropped into Hoboken. And, you know, frankly, I'm not a big fan of Applied Housing because of certain methods they use. I think they play their favorites, with people getting in there. [In some instances] people are jumped over [those on existing waiting lists.]

HM: There's also a question (I don't know whether you want to answer this) -- People would be angry with Applied because it was used as a political force, a voting block. Not allowing the distribution of leaflets.

TO: Exactly. And to this day -- to this day -- there's a group of people who work with Applied Housing who are basically nothing, as far as I'm concerned, but lackeys and henchmen for the owners. Because what they do is -- it's a spy system. They try to spy on any little thing. At the same time, they bully tenants. But they, themselves, are bullied. I'll say that.

HM: And sometimes, with more energy and vitriol than the people who employ them. They get more intense.

TO: Of course. They do it with more zest. They want to make points. They want to make points.

HM: That's the part that scares me. It goes beyond what even is required.

TO: It's true. They'll rally people. Because they'll go and they'll tell people, "We have a rally. You've got to be there."

HM: Right. "Bring your signs."

TO: And people will go.

HM: But there's something to lose there.

TO: Of course.

HM: Especially now. I don't know what's going to happen.

TO: I never liked that part of Applied Housing. I think they have served a purpose here. I agree with you that, if it hadn't been for them, we'd either have a lot of slums here, or everybody would have left. And, by the way, to give them credit, they honored the government contract.

HM: Yes.

TO: Willow Avenue? That was a twenty-year contract, from '71 to '91. To this day, it's still going on.

HM: To this day. Yes.

TO: And others. At one point, I think they were on the verge of doing it, and several people objected, rallied around it, and he backed off. Joe Barry backed off.

HM: And they have other developments. How much money do you need?

But, really, Hoboken would be a very different place.

TO: Yes. Yes.

HM: I don't know if you want to talk about the fires, or you want to talk about Vezzetti, or if you want to take a break and get some water.

TO: Whatever.

HM: It's up to you. The fires -- What's so hard to talk about is, no one was ever charged.

TO: No one was ever charged. And, by the way, there were a couple of fires here. Sometimes people lump in with arson-for-profit fires, that were not --

HM: Like Levelor wasn't, and --

TO: Well, I'm talking about where people lost their lives.

HM: Oh, with the little kids, playing with matches?

TO: Yes. For example, 129 Clinton, next to where that restaurant used to be, La Concha, on Clinton Street, across from where the clinic is now. That was some kids playing with matches. Twenty-one people died in that fire. That was horrible. That was really sad, to see them taking out all the bodies, all day. There was another one on 11th and Willow Avenue, on the corner of 11th Street, where that parking lot is. That whole area, that was leveled by a fire. Eleven people died there. Eleven people died there, and that was caused by a guy who had a quarrel with his girlfriend, a guy from Ecuador. He had a fight with his girlfriend, he came back that night and set fire to the building. She died, and her sisters, young girls-- among others. Eleven people died there.

But, certainly, there were other fires that were deemed to be arson-for-profit, and there were so many

incidences of, I'm going to say, "drills," by these people who were setting the fires - drills, because, although they didn't carry through with setting a fire, it was enough to scare the people out. It was a threat of what could actually happen if you didn't leave that particular building.

HM: A threat. What about Por la Gente. I know that Sister Norberta was organizing --

TO: In 1979, we organized -- I was one of the organizers. There was Norberta; Father Terence Pescatore; ^{Angel}~~Jose~~ Padilla; Manny O'Neill. There was a group of us, and we organized Por la Gente. In Spanish, Por la Gente means "for the people," and this group rallied around the housing problems in Hoboken at that time. Because of the housing situation here, because of what was starting to happen, with the fires and all, we wanted to create some sort of conscience in people to try to maybe get people to own property. One of the things we were looking at was "sweat equity." You know the concept of "sweat equity." That was popular in New York and in the Bronx; it was never successful here. I can name a couple of buildings that, if you look at them now, you say, "How could people have

passed that up?" Where people could have gotten into the building, basically for next to nothing. We could have gotten a government grant for the construction, for the materials and all that stuff. It never happened because, again, our people did not have the mentality to own a house. It was scary to them. Some of them may not have been, like I said, credit-worthy. They didn't have any equity or any funds or anything like that. One of those buildings was the one at 301 Monroe. Near the playground on Second and Madison Street?

HM: Yes.

TO: The building directly behind it. That was a nice building, such a classy place. What a classy-looking building. And another one was on First and Clinton Street, just a block from where Cablevision is, right on the corner of Clinton.

HM: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

TO: Going this way. That building there.

HM: So they were ones that were available?

TO: They were available. They were vacant, basically abandoned, and the owners were open to selling. You could have gotten the building then for \$8-10,000. But we couldn't get families to participate in this. All you needed were like eight families who were willing to tighten their belt, move in there, do the work themselves.

HM: And Por la Gente started, initially, with that?

TO: Yes. That's one of the things we wanted to do. It all revolved around the people who initiated this, who were all basically parishioners of St. Josephs, on Monroe Street. Like I say, at that time, you had the greatest priests and brothers there, old Franciscans -- Terence Pescatore; Brother Christopher Murphy; Brother Ed Handy. I recently saw Brother Edward. These were people who literally (I saw them) would take the shirt off their back to give to a fire victim.

HM: True Franciscans.

TO: Beautiful people. Beautiful people.
We've stayed in touch, here and there, throughout the years. Por la Gente was started in 1979. At one point, I did the one and only Por la Gente brochure. Everything typed, about Por la Gente, everything in Spanish.

HM: Do you have it? If you could find it, that would be great to include that.

TO: I had things in there, trying to instill a "teacher community," and I always remember the word "participacion," which is participation. "What is participation? Participation is taking an active part --" etc. "How can we participate? We can do this, this and this together." A lot of stuff.

In fact, in that brochure I mentioned the thing with CUNA. Because, I'll always remember, I said, "We commend 'Juan Garcia,'" -- I'll see if I can find it. I don't know if I have it. Abraham Lao, a former Hoboken activist, has a copy.

HM: Norberta might have it, too. I don't know if she saved that stuff or not.

TO: She may. She may. I know she's got some articles on the fires. Have you seen those?

HM: There's stuff in the library that's about the fires that's pretty intense, just to read it. And, actually -- [Interruption]

So we're talking, still -- Do you want to say more about the fires and what happened then? We were sort of talking about how Por la Gente started; that it really wasn't from the fires, it was more about people, "sweat equity," and "building homes."

TO: It was basically trying to fight for the rights of people. There was a general concern about keeping people here in Hoboken. It did have to do with the fires, but it wasn't primarily because of the fires -- even though it did eventually revolve around the fires, and eventually we had rallies, and we did marches. We had prayer sessions, where people like, I'll always remember, Rev. Paul Hagedorn, Rev. Geoff Curtis, Barbara Cathey. She was a good friend of mine, too - who was the reverend at the church that used to be on Ninth and Washington. It's condos now. Right on the corner --

HM: Oh, I know which one you're talking about. Was it a Lutheran church?

TO: It may have been Presbyterian. I don't know.

HM: I know which church you're talking about.

TO: And the people from St. Joseph's, of course. St. Joe's got very involved in this, and there would be prayer meetings. We would go, a lot of times, to the sites of the fires.

HM: This is what I remember. I didn't know about the other part of it. I knew about that part, with the rallies.

TO: Yes. And often we met with people who had been displaced -- people who were recent fire victims, and people who had been through a fire previous to them. We would ask them to come and just talk of their experience and coping with the new fire victims -- because there were always new fire victims; people who were recently

displaced. We would bring these people there as an example, to try to encourage displaced tenants not to give up hope. Because some of them, at that time, may have gotten into public housing, or Applied Housing, and gone on to better things. I don't know if it's human nature, but a lot of times it was hard to get an old fire victim to participate. It's like they say, how soon we forget. Now we're in a better situation -- you know.

But yes. Por la Gente did that. The fires -- well, I'm going to tell you. The fires were sad to me, personally, from working with people; from knowing, personally, some of the people who had these fires. I think in *Delivered Vacant*, one of the segments, I point out the incident here, where, actually, the entrance to the building was one of three at 12th Street -- numbrt 106.

HM: The one with those faces.

TO: Exactly.

HM: Because Tim [Daly] had done that drawing, because that's where the fire was.

TO: Exactly, 106 12th Street.

HM: People jumped out of windows.

TO: I had gone there with Sister Norberta on the Wednesday previous to the actual fire, and there had been an incident there the previous week, where somebody had left bottles --

HM: I remember this.

TO: -- filled with flammable liquid, or gasoline. Not only in that building, but in two other buildings that were property of the same owner. The owner was a Cuban woman by the name of Olga Ramos. These were left there to scare people off, and it certainly created a lot of fear in the people there. The police came, and there was a task force that had been formed, as I recall with the state police, the prosecutor's office, the Hoboken police - - I don't think the FBI was involved. In all the fires that occurred in Hoboken at that time, not one person was convicted, indicted, or even arrested. At 106 12th Street the tenants were scared by the Molotov cocktails that had been placed in the hallway. Sister Norberta and I went there one evening, on a Wednesday evening, and we sat in

the apartment of Ana Mercado, who was one of the tenants there. Ana lived there with her husband, her two children, and her father. That evening we met with other tenants of the building, in that apartment. This happened on a Wednesday night and we advised the tenants to establish a "fire watch" in the building, especially during night hours. Two nights later, there was a big fire in that building. At the time, I worked part-time at St. Mary's Hospital, and I used to work there Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, from 7:00 to 3:00, in the emergency room, just to supplement income at home. On Saturday morning, I remember walking down to the hospital, going into the cafeteria, buying a coffee, and going to the emergency room -- I punched in -- and just walked in there and saw tragedy -- just chaos there -- the firemen; seeing people sitting around, huddled up. This was in November. This had to be 1983, I think -- '82-'83? -- and the people from 106 12th Street were there. I learned that eleven survivors were in the ER. The Mercado family was wiped out, killed: Ana, her husband, her children, her father, and six other tenants that had lived there.

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

TO: That really left an impression in my heart, in my mind, my life, that you don't forget. It brings on resentment sometimes, you get upset -- how could things like that happen? Back then, I hated Steve Cappiello. I hated him with a passion. A lot of people used to say that he was behind all the fires, that he sent persons unknown to set them. Of course, that wasn't true. But my resentment was because I think his administration just basically condoned them; did not do enough. Like I say, not one person was arrested or convicted, and the same thing with the Pinter's Hotel, on 14th Street. At Eighth and Willow, there was a fire there. On Washington, across from where the CVS Pharmacy is today --and all the other fires. In so many arson-for-profit fires where there was no loss of life, but countless lives were affected.

HM: And it had the effect of people being terrified that it would happen to them.

TO: Yes. One example of that is the block where I live, across the street, where it had seventy families on Willow and twenty-eight families on 12th. There was a fire at 261 12th Street, which is the corner building on Willow Avenue, and there was a fire there that started

mysteriously. No one was hurt, but it panicked all the tenants, and everybody started to move out. I used to have constant meetings with these people, and we tried to encourage them not to leave. Hudson County Legal Services, some of their lawyers were there at that time and were representing them, counseling tenants, trying to help out. We didn't get results, but we understood that people were afraid. But we were saying, "You don't have to move. This guy is offering you \$4,000 to move. Where are you going to go for \$4,000?" Back then the rents had gone up already, by that time, in Hoboken, and if you were paying a very, very low rent, you would have to leave the area. You're disrupting your children's lives, or you're disrupting the ethnic balance of this city -- "Don't leave. Let's fight this." But, of course, to no avail. Ultimately, the last seventeen families on the block on Willow Avenue moved out, after the three buildings on 12th Street had emptied out.

HM: And did you hear from people who left what happened?

TO: Oh, yeah.

HM: Did they do okay?

TO: Some people went on to better things.
To this day, some people's lives were disrupted to a degree
that was irreparable -- because they moved in --

HM: -- with their relatives.

TO: -- with their relatives, and that
caused changes. Some people moved into worse places. Some
went into the Housing Authority, doubling up.

HM: There was something you mentioned
before, that I just wanted to get back to. [Interruption]
You had said that when you first came there were Cubans
here. No?

TO: No, no. The Cubans came on after --

HM: -- in the '60s, right? It would have
been the early '60s? Before the missile crisis.

TO: Castro took over in Cuba, when? In
1969?

RF: It seems earlier.

TO: No, that's too late.

HM: It had to be the Cuban missile crisis.
So Kennedy still had to be alive.

RF: You said '69. It was probably 1959.

TO: Oh, '59. You're right, '59. Cubans
started coming, but not to Hoboken. More to Union City,
West New York, North Bergen. We had Cuban families in
Hoboken. A couple of Cuban families were actually here
since the 1950s.

HM: -- but not that many.

TO: -- just a trickle.

HM: So Puerto Ricans are here, and then you
said Dominicans, Salvadorans, and Mexicans. But they came
later.

TO: Other Latin American immigrants arrived in Hoboken later. Not recently. We're talking now within -- I'm going to say, in an extreme, within the last ten years, and that's stretching it. Probably eight years. That's when we began seeing more Mexicans.

HM: Mexicans, but Salvadorans before that, though. Salvadorans before that.

TO: Not many Salvadorans in Hoboken. Well, there were some people from Ecuador who came here in the '70s. Ecuadorians were probably -- well, way before the Dominicans, here.

HM: Were Dominicans more '80s?

TO: I would say so, yes. Mid, late 1980s.

HM: Because younger people I've met are Dominican.

TO: Yes. Yes, the Dominicans, I don't think they exceed more than twenty years, coming here. There may have been one or two families here or there. I think we've

got a larger population of Latin American immigrants these days. And although we don't have a huge immigrant population, by the way, but I think they've caught up pretty much with the Puerto Ricans here, too.

HM: To me it's astonishing that there's so much housing here, and yet it's so much luxury housing. As I say, at the end of the little booklets, it's like a reverse migration. Where Hoboken used to be where you could come to live cheaply, now it's a place you come if you have a lot of money.

TO: In all fairness, if you look at the whole picture of the housing here, Hoboken has exceeded [Interruption] -- the quota for affordable housing.

HM: Yes. One-quarter of the housing is --

TO: I think Hoboken really exceeds that, because you have places like the Housing Authority, you've got the Applied Housing buildings, then you've got the senior-citizen housing -- and you also have some private, Section #8s, in between. I know that. I think there will always be a demand for affordable housing, because, as our

children, as people grow up, the demand is always going to be there. I always remember an incident at the Housing Authority, when Tom Vezzetti got elected in 1985, there was a big outcry for affordable housing. The Housing Authority at that time had a waiting list, a big, huge waiting list, and everybody - So when Tom Vezzetti got elected, there was a promise of, "Help us stay in Hoboken." Tommy always said that: "Help us stay in Hoboken. We don't want to leave Hoboken. We want to stay in Hoboken." I remember when he got elected there was such a demand from people looking for apartments, they showed up at City Hall, in my office, all over, in Rent-Control, on the list of the Housing Authority.

What was the Housing Authority waiting list? It was a list that tenants had been supposedly placed on, some for many years. The Vezzetti administration's first task was to put everything in order. But the waiting list was in total disarray. So we were asking people to bring proof that you did apply and all that, and I remember I was going up to the Housing Authority with Tom Vezzetti and holding a meeting there with Dominic Gallo, who was the housing director then. He resented us going down there. He resented us because he was a member of the Cappiello faction. He and I almost got into a physical thing. He

found it very offensive that we were going to revise the waiting list. When we went there, he had a couple of the tenants' representatives there, and there was a lady -- she's still there, I think she's sick. A nice lady, but she was part of the system there -- by the name of Mary Johnson. They called her Momma Johnson, I recall. Sometimes I think that's derogatory, if it's not coming from her own people, you know?

I remember one of the things she said to us -- I'll always remember her saying, "The projects is for projects people." She didn't say "are," she said, "The projects is for projects people. "What do you mean by that?" we asked. She said, "If my son, if my daughter, who grew up here, gets married, needs an apartment, they have to give him an apartment here, priority over everybody else." We said, "You know, you're totally wrong. That's not the concept of what public housing is -- The role of the Housing Authority should be to alleviate the housing situation in the city, generally, by providing alternate housing, substitute housing, new housing for those who have such a need. But they couldn't see beyond that.

HM: She was perceiving it as a birthright.

TO: Exactly. As a birthright.

HM: Were you getting the sense that it was perceived as an ethnic or a racial thing?

TO: No. She was very assertive, because she believed in what she was telling us. Gallo and Cappiello, being politicians, at that moment, would agree with something like that, just to keep that person on their side -- to be in her good graces. Because she had a big family and good rapport with her neighbors. But I'm sure all they saw was many potential votes.

Well, I know that housing back then, compared to the '70s, was tougher to come by. A lot of lives were destroyed because of the fires, and because of the gentrification that took place. Some people accepted buy-outs, by the way, and went their own way -- not that they improved their lives. I think that was all false hope. People took \$4,000 sometimes, knowing they were not going to use it to better their lives. Like I said before, sometimes they would go from slum to slum.

Back then our schools began emptying out, too. I think that's still reflected in the school system here now, because now we're importing kids from other cities, to justify the need for our schools here.

HM: Now they're going to build a new one, because of all the money available. I don't know what they're going to do with all their school buildings.

TO: Back then, with the sale of Leinkauf, we lost these schools. They consolidated children and all that. But right now we're doing all this importing of students from other cities, to justify -- To me that's a whole other ballgame. I don't like what I see with the school system. I've never liked it. We have a group of teachers in our school system who don't even live here. The teachers, certainly 90% of them, don't live here. Certainly, 99% would not send their children to the school system here.

HM: Right.

TO: Yet, they influence the lives of residents here, low-income residents, by standing on a

corner on election day and handing out leaflets, and letting the parents see their kid's teacher standing there, telling them to vote a certain way for issues that, at times, are really negative - unjust tax increases and all that, "vote for this question or that question," that they're certainly not affected by. The teachers aren't affected by this because they don't live here. Yet, they influence parents. And people are very easily influenced. People from minorities, they see the teacher, or the landlord, or whatever, as an authority figure.

HM: Is there any organizing force now, organizing group -- You were talking about people being influenced.

TO: Here? Organizing in what sense?

HM: Well, I've seen different ways -- Even a group like Por la Gente, which was organized and had focused on housing issues -- I see there are political groups, there's an attempt to change -- "Run for Mayor," or whatever -- but I don't hear as much about little civic groups forming.

TO: No. Frankly, I don't know of any.

HM: I'm trying to figure out why that is.
It's not as if the issues went away.

TO: As a matter of fact I saw [my friend
Monica] last week. Do you know Monica Hetterich?

HM: No.

TO: Monica is a person who worked with me
advising Hoboken tenants of their rights for several years.

HM: Oh, yes, I do, actually. Yes, I do.
Yes, I do.

TO: She moved to Jersey City but she kept
on counseling tenants at the drop-in center on Thursdays,
on Eighth and Washington, St. Matthew's Center. She told me
that the Clergy Coalition is no longer sponsoring the drop-
in center.

HM: Really?

TO: I'm not surprised, because during these times issues are different. Now it's more -- You've got roommates -- It's not landlord/tenant anymore. Now it's roommate vs. roommate. The "railroad" situation, the railroad apartment. "I live here, I sleep here, you sleep there. I'm mad or you're mad with me, I can't go through your room to go to the bathroom, so you can't pass through my bedroom to go to the living room."

HM: "You're eating my cheese," or "eating my eggs."

RF: Since rents are so high.

HM: It's a different kind --

TO: It's no longer landlord/tenant, it's tenant vs. tenant.

RF: You go to Judge Judy for that.

TO: Oh, yes. It's all silly stuff. So they did away with the Drop-in Center. I certainly don't know of any community groups that are doing tenant's work. I know

some people who are involved in issues here and there, but individually, not as an organized group.

HM: I'm not sure what that says. It's not as if those issues have completely disappeared. It's only that they've gone underground. Are there advocates for people who -- We were saying, there are still people living in affordable housing, and when you look at statistics, there's still a fair amount of people in Hoboken living at the poverty level -- statistically.

TO: I don't know of any -- We've got the tenant advocate at City Hall now, and the officer of Hispanic Affairs -- to me they're big zeroes, to the left. They're worthless, both of them. I don't think they're doing anything at all. Those are political positions.

So, no. The city may give the impression that there are services that provide protection to Hoboken tenants. I think they know where their bread is buttered.

HM: So it seems. But it's sort of a shock, when you think about it.

TO: Yes, it is.