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Oral History Interview with Joseph Figueroa

Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.037

**Interview conducted by Dorothy Saint Jean on June 11th, 2012 with Dorothy Saint Jean in
New York, New York.**

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So today is June, today is June 11th, Monday, 2012. I'm sitting here with Joe. Joe, could you please tell me your full name, when were you born, where are you from?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Uh, my name is Joe. Joseph Antonio Figueroa. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, Cumberland Hospital. And I'm from Brooklyn.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Which part of Brooklyn are you from, which area, I know there are different areas.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Br-- I, I, I've stayed in different areas of Brooklyn, but the longest I've stayed in one area, uh, I stayed, I was in Brownsville, Brownsville, Brooklyn.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Tell me about yourself, about your upbringing.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Well, um, my background is Puerto Rican. Uh, my family I'm like maybe I think third or fourth generation. They emigrated from Puerto Rico about four generations ago, I don't know how long ago or what year exact, exact year. But uh, yeah, that's about it. Puerto Rican, you said background.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Yeah (laughs).

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Uh, let me see, uh, I guess the first place they ended up back when they came to America from Puerto Rico was Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn. And then a little bit of Bushwick and Williamsburg, and then East New York. The last stop I guess they all settled down to East New York Brooklyn. And my mother and our tribe settled down in uh, Brownsville.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Can you tell me your, what's your first memory, your first memories?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: My first memory of what?

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Just as a child, like could you think back to your very first memory?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: One of my first memories was sitting in the hospital when I was like maybe about four or five years old from third degree burns. We used to live in um, like I said, we lived in Bushwick and Bedford Stuyvesant they had a lot of old brownstones and old buildings there that were there from, from, from the pre-war era, stuff like that, depression era and everything. And our kitchen, our bathroom was located in the kitchen, and the bathroom door was next to the stove and the door opens outwards. So me being a fat kid sitting in front of the stove, waitin' for the chicken to get done I guess, my aunt was in the bathroom and she opened the door and hit me with the door and I hit the stove and the hot water and all the grease and stuff fell on me.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: What, what do you remember what you were thinking --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No, no.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: You just remember being, sitting there.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, I just remember just, I don't even remember that part, like I just remember being in the hospital after. Like sittin' in, in the intensive care unit watchin' TV.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: That's all you remember. I guess that's a good thing.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: You said that your family, you're fourth generation Puerto Rican here in Brooklyn. Brownsville, is it a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood or?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No. Brownsville is a predominantly black neighborhood actually. Bushwick is predominantly Hispanic, Puerto Rican. Um, Williamsburg around that time was you know predominantly mixed, it was like, it was like uh, Puerto Rican, Jewish, black neighborhood. So they came from those type of areas, but we moved to Brownsville uh, when I was like a early teen, pre-teen, stuff like that. But it was predominantly African-American.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: How was it for you being a Puerto Rican kid who lived in a predominantly African-American neighborhood?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Well I wasn't the only, we weren't the only Puerto Rican family. There were a couple more in my neighborhood, in my projects. Um, but like I guess like coming up, like they were looked at as like punks and stuff like that, and they used to get picked on. I used to see a lot of Hispanic people, young boys around my age used to get picked on. And uh, like I just made a promise to myself that wasn't gonna happen to me. I mean, as a matter of fact it did happen to me a couple times, I was bullied and stuff like that, but you know at the end of the day, my bullies became my best friends and we just started doing mischief together and stuff like that. But you know, you just gotta stand up and what you --

[05:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: -- gotta do.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: How did that happen, how did like some of your enemies become your friends or how did you just like say OK I'm not gonna be one of these kids that they --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Like I said, you know I stood up to them and um, you know a couple fights later, you know I'm cool in the game. So you know, everything was good after that and they still continued to pick on whoever they wanted to pick on, black, Spanish, whoever they wanted to pick on. But I just knew they wasn't gonna pick on me no more. So then from then on I just felt like me being the minority in the group that I had to do everything extra, like I had to, to make extra noise and, and, and you know do a lot of ex-- do everything I did had to have been extra, you know what I mean because I just wanted to make a name for myself, just show everybody that I wasn't that you know the guy they could just pick on like that.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Could you tell me about, more about your, your family and your mother and just like your overall upbringing?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Uh... let me see. Oh, my family was, we were kind of deep. Like there were a lot, there were a lot of people in my family. My, my grandmother um, my mother's side was the more dark-skinned Puerto Ricans and then my father's side was like the light-skinned you know white-looking Puerto Ricans. But um, you know obviously I was, I was, I was raised my mother's side. So we heard a lot of stories about from, from

me coming up and from them just coming to America or coming to, to Brooklyn, you know like my grandmother was dark-skinned. A lot of my, the majority of my aunts are light-skinned, my grandmother was dark-skinned and my mother was dark-skinned. So a lot of things used to happen like, like some of the black girls, like I just heard one story that one of the black girls had pulled my grandmother's hair or something like that. And none of the sisters ain't do nothing, but my mother found out and she, the blackness went out of all of them and she was you know they were teenagers at the time, she went out there and approached the girls and it was a big fight. And they just was looking at her like where did you come from, like she was like that's my mother you know what I mean. But um, you know like I mean that's you know, it was a lot of racial things going on back then, a lot of people doing things in Brooklyn. But my family, they was pretty big. I had a lot of uncles, a lot of aunts. A lot of my uncles were involved in gangs and stuff like that. Um, one gang in particular that I remember them being involved was a gang called, called the Dirty Ones. And they was like around Bushwick and Williamsburg area back then they was like, like I wouldn't say biker gangs but they were like dressed like with the MC boots and the leathers and the club jackets and the vests and stuff, leather vests and everything. And they had, when they fought, they had big gang fights and nobody used guns, it was sticks and chains and knives and bats and stuff like that. That's the way my uncles and them was raised and that's the way they was brought up. You know, other than that, that's the way it went on for a couple years. They was involved in the street more and more, involved in the hustling, involved in drugs and stuff like that, assaults and all type of other stuff. Um, eventually some of my aunts became involved, who was their sisters and they became court-- you know they used to carry drugs for them and, and you know make sales here and there for them. But that didn't last too long though, because they stopped, they wasn't doing that for too long. My aunts weren't stupid.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Um, I'ma go backtrack just a little bit to your mother, grandmother being the dark-skinned one, like the darker-skinned in the family. How was it for, do you, do you remember how was it for them when just you know I guess being Puerto Rican you have part of your family who's light-skinned, and then you're in a black neighborhood but then like black people are like, well you're not black, but you kind of

look like us, but you probably have curly hair, longer hair or you know do you remember how it was for her (inaudible) or just that side of your family?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: She was, she was at home, she was right at home. I mean you know everybody there the same complexion as she is and you know it's not like they're gonna look at her differently whether she Puerto Rican or not. You know, they the same you know, she felt like she could just blend in, like she was the same skin color as everybody else in the neighborhood. Me myself like me being just a lighter person, like I used to get into more you know more things and stuff like that and, and, and --

[10:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: -- probably get a little picked on a little bit more because I was light-skinned. I had a little brother who was two years younger than me and he was darker than me. So he, and he was rough. He was, he was a rough boy. So you know, he was, he was good too. They knew he was Puerto Rican too, but it was just something more different about him. He was darker, he was you know taller, he played ball. He was into sports and all that type of stuff. So he blend in you know he was just good with them, because that's what everybody was doing, playing sports and stuff like that. So he got into that. But you know with me I just, you know I had to find my own way. I had to, to make my own name, you know and do what I had to do to survive.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: You talk about making your own name, doing what you had to do to survive. Can you tell me more about that?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: I was just, I don't know, like it was just surviving in, in the streets. I mean Brooklyn is rough. Brooklyn is one of the roughest boroughs there is. So you know you gotta, you gotta do things and it's either you gonna be a victim or you gonna be you know the person that's, that's, that's doing what they gotta do to survive, you know. But um, yeah that's, you know that's, that's about it as far as that. That's the way I feel about situations, because you know Brooklyn is low income. There's not really too many opportunities and stuff like that for young people coming up. There's not a lot of, well back in my day there were some people that um, can be looked to as, as role models and stuff like that. But nowadays there isn't, it's not a lot of people doing positive things and being role models for a lot of these young men and women to look up to.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Who would you say was your role model, youngster?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: I had, I had one positive role model. He was from our project -- well aside from, I can't even say that, because my uncles and my father was just the worst. But um, I had one positive role model and they was, his uh, his name was Staff and he used to work in the um, in the community center in the projects. And uh, he got murdered and stuff like that in the projects and the neighborhood in general we just took it real hard because he was well known and liked, you know. So but um, that was one of the, guess that was one of the only positive role models I had. But you know everybody else was just gangsters after that, gangsters I looked up to, people in the street, guns, slingin' guns and hustling and stuff like that. But um, mmm hmm. That's about it, I don't think I had any other positive role models.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: How did it affect you, like do you remember what you were thinking when he, you know --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Well, we all was thinking the same thing, like it don't pay to be a good guy. It don't pay to be a nice guy. Like nice guys finish last. And you know, everybody took it as a learning experience or a lesson, and they took from it what they felt was a lesson to them, and they just kept on.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So that's how you took it. And you said that you, I guess the, the life like the way your uncles lived and your father lived, that was glorified to you, was that something...

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Wasn't glorified to me until I, until I realized what they was into and what they was doing. I mean as a, as, as being a baby and a toddler growing up, I didn't know what they was really into until I got older. Then I realized what it was. Then at that time when I got older, it was kind of glorified you know. Did a lot of things, blatant stuff, a lot of flamboyant stuff you know. Everything that comes with drugs and money and stuff like that and violence. And it was kind of glorified to us. In addition to everything else we were seeing on TV and stuff like that, all the different shows. So um, yeah it was kind of.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So did you see your role model, you were like OK, good guys finish last. You see these other guys are getting what they want --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Mmm hmm.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: -- did you say OK I'll do this or which path did you go in, when you were coming up as a teenager?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Oh man, I went, I went, I went the negative path (laughs).

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Tell me more about that. Like about that time being in Brownsville --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: I'ma try to say as much without, without, without um, without implicating myself in things. I don't know, I took, I took the negative path. I mean I went to --

[15:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: -- I went to, went to junior high school, I went to IS 55 in Ocean Hill Brownsville. I graduated from there and I went to Thomas Jefferson. And after my second year in the ninth grade, I dropped out. And I started attending the school of the hard knocks and just was in the street, you know runnin' around, hustlin' and um, gettin', learning lessons from, from older guys that was gangsters you know. Was teaching us the game and stuff like that. So just runnin' around the neighborhood and again putting, trying to make a name for myself and, and, and, and trying to make examples of other people stuff like that. But uh, yeah, I chose that path, and you know just now I'm here today, made me the man I am today.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So um, I'm trying to go back to it. You chose that path um, what, you know dropped out of high school, how did your family take it or your mother you know --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: They took it as they knew it was gonna happen, because that first two, I mean you know that first year or two in high school, I wasn't really doing too good and I was cuttin' school. And it was just, it was just violent like I was going to Thomas Jefferson which is the first impact school in New York City. I believe they was the first school to have a metal detector. The year that I went there it was, it was a double-homicide on the second floor of the school. I still remember hearing the gunshots and me being in typing class. So um, it was just the worst. Like and we was from Brownsville and the school was in East New York. And Brownsville and East New York didn't get

along. We was going back and forth with them. Actually I was pretty good in East New York though because I had family in East New York like I said earlier. And they was from the projects as well. So I was pretty good and far as with that you know. I had a couple altercations with you know other people from East New York, but not right there in the particular projects where my family was from. But it was just going back and forth and it wasn't, it wasn't, it wasn't a positive environment Thomas Jefferson. It was just the worst. It wasn't a positive environment. It was very negative. It was very dreary. People's always scheming on leaving school early or leaving after homeroom so they won't get a [cuttin' card] sent to their, to their house and stuff like that. So I dropped out and that was that. I started livin' the street life. And it was like my mother already knew like, it was, it was, it was buildin' to that. So she already knew what was gonna happen.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Did she try to do any interventions before that --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, yeah she did. I was getting cuttin' cards to the house and I used to get slapped and stuff like that. And you know, and that be that. Ain't really much she was, she was gonna do. She wasn't gonna kill me or nothin', you know. So I continued to continue school until I finally dropped out.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And what, what was the breaking point, like what was it that made you say, you know what, this is not for me, I'm gonna drop out?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Like I said, the second year in the ninth grade, and that first couple of months in, in, in those freshman classes again, I said I couldn't take it no more. I'm not doing it. And I just you know, just left.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And you mentioned that Thomas Jefferson was an impact school, what's an impact school?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: There's, there's a list of impact schools that are like they're like known for violence and stuff like that and known for like a high level of truancy you know what I mean. Like people just not going to school and people fightin' and cuts and stuff like that and gang fights. So you know majority of the time a lot of the impact schools have metal detectors, you don't see those type of, that type of stuff in the school in like the suburbs and stuff like that. You don't see metal detectors like, and I worked in schools. Yeah, that's what, those are what impact schools are.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And then um, how, can you tell me about you know how it was for you when you first dropped out of school being on, runnin' the streets --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: I was just, you know I had to figure out what I was gonna do. I did a couple of odd jobs. I was working. I worked, my first job was um, was um, custodial maintenance in the, in the, in the health clinic in Brownsville. Uh, they was at 444 Hopkinson at first and then they moved to [Ragway] Avenue.

[20:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: So I was with them like off and on, like seasonal, like in summertime and a couple, some months throughout the year and stuff like that, but it was nothin' temp-- permanent. And I did some roofing for a little while, construction and stuff like that. But that wasn't permanent neither. So you know, finally I just gave in, I just started hustling. I just started doing what my friends was doing. Hustling, sellin' drugs in the projects. That's what I did.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And you were the Puerto Rican kid amongst the black kids.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I kind of stuck out like a sore thumb. But uh, yeah.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Tell me about that time when you, you know, really kind of shifted over from doing odd jobs to doing what your friends were doing.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Um, it just like, like just being, like I was, I was, I was down but I wasn't like in the, like in that inner circle of like the real Gs, like the older dudes and stuff like that. But um, just hangin' around and them seeing my face and them hearing things that I'm going to the projects and stuff like that, you know made them take a liking to me. And eventually I became a part of that inner circle and I started doing things and moving and hustling and getting drugs from them, you know, and selling them in the projects. We got guns and stuff like that. So you know, we pretty good. So I felt kind of safe and I felt like I had some type of purpose, like I was gonna try to make some money to try to support my family and stuff like that.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Um, at that point in time, you mentioned your mother, you know, she slapped you around a few times, and then you were like, there was nothing she could do. Were your parents still together or --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK, she was a single mother.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah. My father left when maybe I don't even know how old I was, maybe nine, eight, nine years old. But I for the most part I pretty much knew him though. He wasn't like not there or absent like. And it wasn't his choice, it was my mother's choice. She didn't want to be with him or around him, so. You know, but I think if it was his choice he would've been involved in my life a little bit more, than what he was. But um, was that the question?

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: How did, what did he, what was his reaction when you decided to -
-

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Oh he was already gone. Oh him? He was already gone. Nothing he could do, like I said he was only around till we was like eight. I was like eight years old, and then after that, it was, he was gone and it was just, I'm the oldest, so you know I'm the one that really had to develop the fastest and, and just to be the man of the family I had to develop and experience things the fastest. Experience is the best teacher.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: You said you had, you were the oldest, how many other siblings did you have?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Um, I have three brothers and one sister.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And um, how, when you were, when you were trying to gain the trust of the older guys, do you remember what you were thinking, saying to yourself OK, I'm gonna make them trust me --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No, wasn't nothin' like that. A lot of times a lot of the stuff young people do, they do it subconsciously. Like they don't, they don't really realize what they doing until it's, it's being done. They don't, they don't realize what they're getting themselves into. They just, like they just livin' life everyday. So it's not like I had a actual plan, because they ain't have to mess with me. Like if I ain't, if they didn't want -- oh sorry -- if they didn't accept me, I could go somewhere else, like I could do what, I'm gonna get some money or I'm gonna do something, you know what I mean. But um, I, like I was accepted by my peers, so that was good enough for me.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Did you, was there ever a point when you were like, I'm in way over my head, what am I doing?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Uh... not really. Because my friends was like I said, my friends, my peers were doing the same thing I was doing and going through the same thing I was going through. And I watched them. You know what I mean, I seen how they react to certain situations in life and stuff like that. And like if they could do it, I could do it too.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. When was the turning point for you during that time when things, when you kind of had to change paths?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: That was years later.

[25:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Years, years down the line. I had to go, I went upstate for seven years. And uh, it was at that point you know, I, I thought about what I was doing. But um, a lot of other things that happened when I was upstate that, that, that, that kind of directed me or put me on the path that I am right now. But uh, would you like to hear about it? (laughs)

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Yeah, when you say upstate, because some people might not know what it means. Can you explain to them what upstate is?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Like I was locked up. I was in New York State correctional facilities, at least 11 of them. They kept kicking me out of different jails back, back and forth.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Any particular reason why?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Gang-related issues and stuff like that, security issues, they wanted, one jail they kicked me out of because they said I was a threat to the security of the facility so they kicked me out. You got, you got that?

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: (laughs) So tell me more about that experience.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Which one?

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Just about being --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Oh what made me change --

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Yeah, upstate --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: -- my path. Well uh, I don't know, like I was upstate and um, well before I went upstate, I was uh, I was involved with gangs. And one of the major gangs that I was involved in was the UBN, United Blood Nation, the Blood gang. And um, it carried on with me when I was upstate uh. At that time, Bloods was, you know the gang, the Blood gang was starting to get big and stuff like that and they were all over upstate New York in, in the jails and stuff like that. So you know I became involved with that and every, every, every jail I went to they gave me some type of leadership position. So um, you know because they seek leadership skills you know that I had and they seen that I could relate and people could relate to me, the little homies could relate to me, the little other gang members that was following behind them and stuff like that. So other people that weren't in gangs see you know what was going on and I was in a couple of uh, prisons that were super-max facilities behind the wall. So it was a lot of political prisoners that I had met, a lot, a lot of celebrities, a lot of celebrities, mafia guys, um, serial killers, people that slaughtered their whole family and cut people heads off and stuff like that. And they see me in the yard calling me ins and you know all the Bloods is listening to me and following my direction and stuff like that. And uh, they seen what was going on. So one time this one, this, this one older guy, he was a Black Panther, he came to me and he was like, "Listen young Blood, man you gotta stop having these meetings in the yard because you making it hot," because they was out there gambling and they played poker for cigarettes and money and stuff like that. And they was like, "You gotta stop, you gotta stop having these meetings in the yard man. You gonna make it hot. It's hot out here. You know, y'all wilding out your Bloods," da, da, da. He was like, "You know what man," but he was like, "But I respect you man, I'm feeling what you doing, but you could be doing a whole lot of positive things with the, with the gift that you got." So me and him got cool and we used to meet the yard sometime, we used to spin the yard, walk around the yard like 100 times just talking. And he used to bring books out for me, a lot of revolutionary books and stuff like that. And, and uh, uh, political books, you know, books not strategy, war strategy and stuff like that, because Black Panthers were into that type of stuff. You know, I took a liking to it enough you know and I sunk it all in and, and, and I educated myself. I got my high school diploma

when I was upstate. I was a liaison uh, inmate liaison. I was a teacher's aide. I did all type of stuff upstate. And I was pretty good for being a Blood member. And I got kicked out of so many jails and lost so many of them jobs it's not even funny. But um, you know so my path slowly started changing and I started being more aware what was going on, even though I was hundreds of mile away upstate, you know I was always aware what was going on in society and New York City we used to get the newspapers stuff. I used to read the newspaper every single day. I see what was going on with the gangs and stuff like that. Kept my ear to the street. I didn't really like what was going on. So you know, couple years later, from being upstate, had about two years left for me to go home --

[30:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: -- my mother passed away. She passed away, they let me come down to the funeral and stuff like that, pay my respect. And uh, I think that was like my turning point. I think that was my turning point when my mother passed away when I was upstate. I just was like I'm not gonna do it no more. Like I felt like, at first I felt like before she passed I just wanted to come home and just do things, just make her proud of me and stuff like that, and be a good boy. But when she passed away I just was like, I don't think, I felt like I didn't have anything to come home to, stuff like that. But I had a pretty decent support system you know and a lot of guys up there was they experienced the same thing. They lost their mother while they was in jail and you know some of them didn't even get the opportunity to go to the funeral and stuff like that. But um, that was my turning point I think. Think that was my turning point. I said, I'm not doing it no more. I'm still gonna come home. I'm still gonna make her proud of me, do something positive with myself. And I did. Came home, December, 2003... I went to school for human services. I had two internships with city government agencies and uh, from then on I just you know began working with different populations under the human services umbrella.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And um, when you decided, I have, I'm just gonna backtrack a little bit just to get a few questions that I have answered. Um, you mentioned the part of the Blood, United Blood Gang.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Mmm hmm.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: How was it being Puerto Rican, leading this gang, and then they have like --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: (laughs) That's a whole other story, yeah that's crazy.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: I know they have other Latin, predominantly Latin --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Gangs, yeah.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: -- jails as well.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: They didn't like me for that.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: How was it?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: They felt like, they felt like I betrayed them, like you know what I mean. Like I was a Blood and at that time it was a big war between the Bloods and the Latin Kings, and there was another gang called the [Nietas] too. And um, they, they, they didn't like me. They wanted to kill me. They didn't like me at all. But uh, you know it is what it is. Like when you, when you, when you were the certain tribe and you're brought up with a certain tribe, I mean us, just, just us period, we're all tribal people, by, by nature. So whatever tribe you was brought up in, you accepted by that tribe, you gonna be accepted as one of them and that's who you are, you know what I mean. So you know not saying that my tribe wasn't Puerto Rican because my family is, you know they are Puerto Rican. But like you know like I said, just when I moved to Brownsville, it was just Brownsville, just the projects. You know, I didn't have my family around anymore. My mother moved out of my grandmother house and we went off on our own and moved to Brownsville. But they didn't like me upstate for that though. And even it was, it was some, some Bloods that didn't like it either, some Bloods that have high -- like I didn't have no position, like I didn't have no position or nothin', I wasn't you know um, I wasn't like a leader as far as like being the leader of a, a certain faction or a set of Bloods. But they just knew that I had that in me. And every prison I went to, they just took a liking to me, and they was like, "Listen, we want you to do this. We want you to you know school the homies and we want you to help with this and this that the third." That's what I did, and you know I became the leader in different jails, and you know just runnin' different jails as far as Bloods and stuff like that. They didn't have a leader in the certain jail that I went to, I would assume that position and everybody would respect it. But um, a lot of

the Hispanic gangs didn't like that. But it is what it is though, like they couldn't do nothin' to me.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Could you, could you straddle both worlds, like you know say yeah, I'm part of this gang but I'm still you know, I'm Puerto Rican, like you, you know talking as we speak the same language, Spanish --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: There was some, there, there was, there was other Bloods like that. But let me go back to the, to the guy who was one situation he was a Blood and he didn't like me. And he didn't like Puerto Ricans period, and he didn't like me. So he came to the jail and it was like around Y2K, like they had a Y2K lockdown, like remember they thought every, all the lights was gonna shut off for the year 2000 or whatever, when the ball dropped --

[35:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: -- but uh, in the mix of all that, you know one, one of the, one of the major leaders of the Bloods had left, he got his own set and stuff like that. So a guy that was under him had came in while he was going out, he was coming in, they did like a big draft and they mixed up a lot of jails and stuff like that. So um, he came to the jail and you know he was saying that, that the jail was messed up and he didn't like the way things was running, and he didn't like the way the Bloods was doing this, that and the third and the way they was moving. So they um, you know the Bloods came to me, you know they was like, this guy's down here, he's talking, da, da, da. So I went out there, I met the dude. And um, I told him, "Listen, uh, you saying jail messed up right?" He was like, "Yeah." I was like, "You know, your old G just left here, like a couple weeks ago. So if you saying that it's runnin' messed up, then maybe he was the one that left it fucked up," I don't know if I can curse. But he was the one that left it messed up. And he just looked at me and was like, he couldn't believe I said that and then he just looked at me and was like, I could just tell, he just was like, little bastard. (laughs) So it is what it is you know. And he just had to respect that you know. (coughs) But even though he was there, he had a high, he had a actual position. He was on papers as being you know a general, five-star general. I was still the head of the committee and committee rules. And I was the head the committee. So he can't just come in there and just call shots

without us votin' on it, you know what I mean. And if he play around, he'll be the next one that be layin' on the plate (laughs) you know what I mean. But he was aggressive guy though, so you would have to be like that, wasn't no plan with them type of guys up there. But um --

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Did you guys ever come around to any mutual agreement or understanding?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Not really. No.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: You mentioned that you know your mother moved out your grandmother's house, and your family stayed back in East New York, did you have other cousins who were in let's say Latin Kings or --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Did they get involved with anything?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So there was no like gang-related --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: On my side of the family, I was the oldest. And I was Blood. And it was understood there's nothing else other than that, don't go against me. And nobody even touched the gang thing at all. Nobody else touched the gang thing after me.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: I guess that's a good thing in your eyes.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, it, it kind of is like a good thing, because it's like you know, I paved the way and, and I lived it and I'm short telling them that it's not you know what to do and I ain't even really have to tell them that, like they, that's the way we was brought up. We was brought up to be men, so like we stand on our own and we don't have a problem with saying no. So.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now, how was it for you transitioning from the, transitioning when you got out. What year was it when you went in because we didn't get that?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: I got in um, I court the case in 1996 and I was on the run for two years, and then caught in '98. So from 1998 to 2000, like February, 1998 to like December 2003. So I came home, so I did 65 months and 217 (sic) days upstate.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Wow. You said you were on the run, were you on the run here in New York, like --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, I had, yeah I had a case in another state, we was selling drugs at, another town, we were selling drugs in Binghamton. And I had a court case up there and I got bailed out and I ran, never went back to court. So I jumped bail, stuff like that, they were looking for me for like two years.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK, they found you in Brownsville?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No, they ain't found me in, they found me in another town.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Oh OK.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: And I got arrested, they ran my fingerprints and they, they found out that I was on the run. So that's how I got all that time.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK, being on the --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: For the crimes and jumping bail.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. How was it for you when you were leaving, transitioning out of jail into you know when you got out, you said you started to change your ways, while you were in, when you met the Black Panther, older guy. You know, when you, when you knew you were about to get out, how was that transition phase for you?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Uh --

[40:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Well, I went upstate for drug cases and I got caught up in, in the, in the notorious Rockefeller Drug Law, and that, and that, and that bracket. So um, you know they, they, they changed a lot of the laws which um, helped a lot of guys come home off of drug cases. But uh, one thing that they did do was they, they made it mandatory for all drug cases to go through a um, some type of halfway house or program. Like you have to go through a drug treatment program, mandatory regardless if you was selling or using it. You, you, had to go. So during like the end of my bit upstate, I went to a program called KSat. And KSat was like a therapeutic community and there was a side of the jail that was secluded from everybody else and population. Wasn't like protective custody, it was like an actual program where you had to make your bed every morning, you had everything had to be organized, your socks, you had to have the 90-degree crease on the, on the corner of your bed and you had to use the buffer machine and buff the floors until you could see your reflection in the floors, stuff like that. So

from there, um, they had like this thing where they transitioned guys from that type of, of, of um, from that type of environment that therapeutic community into one out in, out in the street. So now we're still state property but they have us in like a halfway house. And the one that they had a contract with at the time was the Phoenix house. From what I understand, the Phoenix house is one of the best um, drug treatment programs and therapeutic communities there is in America. So um, they sent me there, I went to one in the Bronx and I'm from Brooklyn, so you know that was the worst. They had me all the way in the Bronx, a building full of guys from jail. We had to sit in there for about 45 days before we was allowed to go out and look for a job or go on um, you know overnights and furlough weekend, weekend passes and stuff like that. And um, what was so crazy about it is that when I was doing the transition phase, like a lot of the guys that were in there were Hispanic, because you know they sold a lot of drugs and we had a lot of Dominicans in there, a lot of Spanish people from Harlem and, and the Bronx and stuff like that, that dealt in heavy drugs. So the, the majority of them was in there and they were in the Bronx which is predominantly Hispanic. And then you know we, we, we were there and I'm Hispanic, but at that time like you know I was kind of tight on my Spanish a little bit, like I, I tightened up my Spanish because I didn't really speak Spanish too much. But you know, a lot of them guys were cool with me, they had a lot of love for me and stuff like that. So you know it was a respect thing. They knew that I was Hispanic but I don't rock with y'all, like you know these my peoples over here, I'm from Brownsville, or from Brooklyn period. So they had this one counselor, and he was my counselor, he was a senior counselor. He was taking money from some of the, from the majority of the Spanish guys in there. A lot of these Spanish guys, they had families and stuff like that. So he would give them, he would do \$20, like you had to pay him \$20 under the table to you know because remember when I said you gotta stay there for 45 days, a lot of those guys was getting overnights within the week, within two weeks they was getting overnights because they were paying -- not overnights, they were getting passes to go see they family and they was paying him under the table. And the counselor was Hispanic and all them was Spanish. And you know the black dudes in there, my homies, they just was like yo, we not stupid. We see what's going on, you know what I

mean. And uh, the one morning I went and I got on the line, like it was, it was, it was a line like every morning, like Sunday and Saturday and he would give, for \$20 he would give them 11:00 to 11:00 or 10:00 to 10:00, you know what I mean, 10:00 in the morning to 10:00 at night, you just gotta come in. Nothin' over 11:00 in the evening, everybody had to be in the building by 11:00. But um, so I got in the line, I wanted to know what was going on. I got in the line and I knew what was going on. I went in there, and he was my counselor. I spoke to him and I was like, I want to go home. You know what I'm saying, I want to go home too. So he said, "A-ight, a-ight," he was like, "How much you got?" I don't even think he asked me how much I got. I think he assumed that I knew already, you know what I mean. So I was like a-ight cool. He gave me a time, I guess he said 10:00 to 10:00 or 11:00 to 11:00, I ran upstairs --

[45:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: -- got dressed, all my friends was like, "What the hell's going on? Where you going?" I'll be back later. Went home, whatever, went all the way to Brooklyn. Was like hour-and-a-half ride on the train. Coolin' and stuff like that, I had a girlfriend at the time, she had a car so she'd drive me back sometimes to the Bronx. And uh, the next week, you know at, I came back and I let everybody know what was going on and stuff like that. But everybody knew and I had to go down there advocate for them, because they wanted to start, a lot of them wanted to go home too, and they got money too. You know what I mean, so I went down there and I spoke to the counselor and I was like, "Yo, you know this ain't, this ain't legal and you think stupid, they know what's going on, but on top of that, you only doing it for the Spanish people. So how long you think this gonna last before one of them guys tell on you?" You know what I mean? And he was like, he looked at me, he was like, "Yo you right. Bring me the list." So I went upstairs, I got a list. And I just was dealing with people that I knew wasn't gonna be stupid and mess it up and come home late or come back to the building late. So got a list, I came, brought it down, he scratched out the ones that he didn't want, and that was these two young boys, they was from Brownsville, was tight. We was upstate together and we came from the program, then came down, we was real tight. He didn't want them to go, they was the youngest ones in there. He didn't want them to go. And I

was like, "Listen, these are my guys. They live around, they live in my neighborhood, one of them live like two blocks away from me. I got them, I'ma make sure they, they be back." And he was like, "A-ight man." So you know take them down, let them run around, do what they did. We met up at the train, matter of fact, yeah, we met up at the train station and we all went back up together. So made sure then from then on, they was cool, they can go out, stuff like that. That's some of the stuff that was going on up there. So yeah.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So Brooklyn, traveling back and forth. And you said that you, your Spanish got better, so I'm assuming growing up you didn't speak Spanish very much in the house?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Nah, they, a-- actually, my grandmother had told me I speak fluent Spanish as a child. But then as I guess I got older, I didn't really have too much use for it, livin' in Brownsville, my mother spoke Spanish to me, and unfortunately the majority of the stuff she used to say was curse words, but you know, she spoke Spanish pretty, pretty good. But uh, I didn't really have too much use for it besides Spanish class in high school. But um, I got a little better as time went on, as I was being upstate. And again, that's a tool, like that opens doors as well, you know what I mean, knowin' another language, opens doors so.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now how was your experience going from the Phoenix house back to, when you moved back to Brooklyn, how was that transition from now from the Phoenix house, come to Brooklyn not being part of the program, just doing, getting a job, you said you went to school for human resources --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Human services.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: -- human services, was this while you were upstate or when you got out?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: When I got out, I went to school. There was a program called [Vesit]. I went for orientation and I was going, one of the requirements of Vesit is, Vesit is a program run, funded by the Board of Education for people with physical and mental disabilities and they sent them to school and they pay a portion of you know their school or they'll pay all of it. So I went there, they sent me to school for human services and I

graduated. I had the best internship in my class and I had from that one internship, I had another internship at the mayor's office. And from then on it was just buildin' my portfolio and meetin' people you know.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: What made you go the route of human services?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: My family is like, on my father's side, they're like teachers and some people on the other side too, some of my aunts, they're teachers, they're care providers and stuff like that. So I think it's in my blood to help people you know.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Only natural, and then you said, from your experience you had like leadership experience, just like natural leadership skills. And I know that now today, are you still in the Brownsville area or where, where are you in Brooklyn right now?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: In Crown Heights.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Crown Heights? And how would you say Crown Heights is similar or different to Brownsville from when you were growing up?

[50:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Crown Heights is, it's the same. It's the same. A mixture of a little bit of everything. You got Jewish people. You got a lot of Caribbean people. You got Hispanic people. A mixture of everything. You got white people nowadays. Brooklyn is going through the gentrification process. So you know, you starting to see a lot of white people and in certain areas where you wouldn't normally see them.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Do you keep in contact with any of the people who like when you were growing up, some of your friends who used to get in trouble with --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: -- did they go through the same experiences as you?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: As far as with prison?

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Yeah.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, some of them. Uh, I don't think they did, I mean the ones that was around my age, I don't think they did as much time as me. I think they did a lot of time, but not in one shot. Like they would do skid, what we call skid biz, is like one year, two years, eight months, nine months, what all that add up though.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: In and out. You ever try, for some of them who kind of probably don't do exactly the same thing as they did when they were younger, but did you ever try and say look, you need to go a different route, what are you doing?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No, no.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: You never try to change them.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: No, they grown men.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So you think that they're grown men and they don't need --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: I mean I would, I would think that, I mean I like to lead by example you know what I mean. Sometimes I don't, I don't like to lecture people, you know what I mean. Even though I want to, but a lot of times I just lead by example, like you know you do what you do, I do what I do, just live life.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And that's, I know you do stuff with teenagers, do you ever try and say look, I've been there done that, and some of them are like man --

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, those are the people I do lecture. But they're not grown. They're still kids. You know, they're easily influenced by, by different things, negative or positive. But uh, I do motivational speaking with them, I do gang intervention and prevention. I do mediations. Um, I do family mediations between kids and family, families, between their families. But uh, what's your question?

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Yeah, that was my question, what do you do with them. Do you think if you had some of these services when you were growing up it would've been different for you or?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, probably, probably. Like I said, there weren't a lot of resources. There weren't a lot of role models. And there weren't a lot of opportunities. There weren't a lot of job opportunities. So it probably would've been different if I had a little bit more help, you know if we had a little bit more help, our young people.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now as an adult, older years, do you still straddle the, the African-American community and Puerto Rican community, still the same or is it just non-existent now that you're as it was when you were in jail or when you were with the gang?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Well those, those, those separations, um, they you know they still exist. But I don't, I don't um, I don't acknowledge those things no more. Because I think

there's something real like it's not even nothin' to really acknowledge. Like we all the same, like I said we all tribal people. Um, and coming up I did a lot of studying and a lot of you know reading up on things and stuff like that. But we all come from the same background, we all have the same background as far as you know Africa being like one of the first civilizations and, and what was going on was slavery and how they was taking different people to different areas and stuff like that. Just so happens in Puerto Rico at one time, it was more Africans on that island than it was anything, you know, than there was Indians, at the time it was inhabited by Indians. But um, it's the same, you know, we all, we all tribal peoples, the same tribe to me, you know. So I don't really acknowledge it, but it does happen, and people still, still live by those type of ways of thinking about race and, racism and cultures and all that. But it does happen, it --

[55:00]

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: -- it still happens though.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And um, do you feel, does it frustrate you sometimes that people like, especially with society they like to put people in a box, you either have to, oh yeah, feel like you have to belong to a certain group, have to fit into a box.

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Yeah, but that's natural though, because you know, everybody wants to be a part of something, you know what I mean, everybody wants to identify with something. When you in school, people identify with different fraternities and sororities and stuff like that. So you know, when you're in the street, people identify with the gangs, the crews in the street.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Is there anything else you wanted to add, just to wrap up this interview today, June 11th, 2012?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: I don't know. I just you know I love Brooklyn (laughs). I love Brooklyn. I've been here all my life. I was born in Cumberland Hospital, Fort Green area.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Is Cumberland Hospital still there?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: Uh, they rebuilt it.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: What is it called today?

JOSEPH FIGUEROA: It's called Cumberland still, mmm hmm, it's called Cumberland.
It's in the Fort Green area, I believe, Clinton Hills area. Uh, you know, I'm a Brooklyn-
ite, I'ma be here forever (laughs).

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: All right, thank you.

[56:34]

END OF AUDIO