

Interviewee: Olga López-Hill
Interviewers: Cassie Algar, Megan Edwards, and Rick Turvey
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Abstract: Olga Lopez-Hill was born in Puerto Rico on April 24, 1955. Today, she works as a family counselor for the Worcester Community Action Council, a resource center for families. Through the years, Olga has worked with children and youth in the Piedmont neighborhood of Worcester. At Piedmont, she has organized various projects related to cultural activities, the construction of a basketball court, and the creation of a community garden. Even though she is now married, Olga raised her two children as a single mother while continuing her education at Quinsigamond Community College and later at Worcester State College. After serving for over 25 years as Coordinator of Admissions and Public Relations at Quinsigamond, Olga remains active in the community. In this interview, Olga describes her experience growing up in New York City and Worcester. She also shares her knowledge about education and work from the perspective of a Spanish-speaking woman in the United States, and specifically, in Worcester.

CA: My name is Cassie Algar and I'm here with Megan Edwards and Rick Turvey. We're in Worcester and today is April 6, 2011. We're collecting oral stories about women's lives in Worcester. Based on the principles suggested in the National Convention for Women's Rights, which was held in Worcester in 1850, we are paying special attention to topics about family, education, work and participation within the community. Thank you very much for helping us with this project.

OLH: You're welcome.

ME: Is it okay if I record this interview?

OLH: Yes, that's fine.

RT: What is your maiden name and your married name?

OLH: My name, my maiden name is Lopez and my married name is Hill.

RT: What is your date of birth?

OLH: April 24 of 1955.

RT: With what ethnicity do you identify yourself?

OLH: Latina.

RT: In what neighborhood did you grow up and what was it like to live there?

OLH: I grew up in Brooklyn, New York and it was a neighborhood... at that time, it was good, and the families were unified. We all knew each other.

ME: Oh, when did you arrive to the city? Year and, or age...

OLH: To the... to New York?

ME: Yes.

OLH: To New York when I turned 12.

ME: Okay, and to Worcester?

OLH: To Worcester [Massachusetts] when I was... 19.

ME: Okay, where do you live now?

OLH: Now, in Worcester.

ME: Where have you lived throughout your life?

OLH: Where have I lived...?

ME: Yes, throughout your life.

OLH: I'm going to say in Worcester. Because I've been here since I was 19 and I'm turning 52 this month. So, here.

ME: Do you have children?

OLH: Yes, I have two kids.

ME: These next questions are about education. In what year did you graduate?

OLH: "Oh my God!" [Laughs.] I don't remember very well but... First I had my children and then I went to college at Quinsigamond Community College, and then I studied part time, business administration, at Worcester State College. But in what year... that I can't remember, I'm sorry. I would have to look it up [laughs.]

ME: Have you been recognized for any of your accomplishments regarding education?

OLH: Yes, much recognized—I have two or three boxes full of awards. I was recognized for serving in the neighborhood, in the Piedmont neighborhood, and for bringing information on education for the youth in the Piedmont neighborhood. I also received an award for helping to build a basketball court for the youth there and also a community garden. We used to do several things in that neighborhood, for the children, such as an Easter egg hunt or Christmas caroling, and also a Halloween parade for them. So, we were rewarded that way. Oh, I was also recognized in the college where I used to work for helping Latino students and they even—they created a scholarship in my name so that the youth who go to college can receive funding. I have also been recognized in my current job, too.

ME: Is Spanish your first language and where did your parents work when you were a young girl?

OLH: Spanish is my first language, and my mom worked, hmm... she was like ironing... she worked helping in different households taking care of children and other people. And my dad used to work in....

CA: You can use...

OLH: In a “Co-Op,” as if it were a credit union here.

ME: Yes.

CA: You can use English to...

OLH: In Puerto Rico.

CA: You can use English to say those words.

OLH: Oh! OK.

ME: Yes, OK. How did you feel growing up in a Latino community when you were a girl?

OLH: In Puerto Rico or in the United States?

ME: In the United States.

OLH: OK. I felt, well—I grew up in New York and had lots of friends, they spoke English and Spanish, ...and many friends who were Italian, because I grew up in an Italian neighborhood.

ME: And in Puerto Rico, was it the same?

OLH: Well, [laughs] in Puerto Rico... only Spanish... but I was in a very protective community. So, I was fine.

ME: OK. What are some positive and negative aspects of your Hispanic heritage, in your opinion?

OLH: To me... positive ones.... Ask me the question again.

ME: What are the positive and negative aspects of your Hispanic heritage, in your opinion?

OLH: OK. The positives... we are—in my family, as Latinos and in the community, we are very attached to one another, we help each other. Negative ones... I can't think of a single one right at this moment, to me, but if... if I think of one, I'll return to this question.

ME: OK. Now we have a few questions about school. Where did you go for grade school and high school?

OLH: Elementary, in Puerto Rico until sixth grade, sixth grade. And in New York, in New York..., junior high, high school.

ME: Which college did you attend?

OLH: In Worcester, I went to Quinsigamond Community College and Worcester State College.

ME: What did you want to do when you were a young girl?

OLH: I wanted to be a fashion designer.

ME: Did you face any challenges in school?

OLH: Well, yes, only because I already had my two children and I attended school when I had kids.

ME: Did you have a professor or teacher that served as an inspiration to you?

OLH: Yes, in the seventh grade I had a teacher when I was learning English, I already knew a little bit of English, who inspired me and brought me many books to read and he told me that I had lots of potential. And he told me to read, read, and read. That reading was going to be helpful to me in the future.

ME: Do you have a favorite book?

OLH: No, right now—I like to read—right now I am reading *El color de mi familia*, “The Color of My Family.” But no, I can read any book... I don't have a favorite one.

ME: What were your strengths and your weaknesses in school?

OLH: I was always a good reader, because I enjoy reading. And math, because I decided to continue studying business administration. So, mathematics was great. I never enjoyed history, but now I like it.

ME: Who supported you the most when you were in school?

OLH: When I was young, my... my parents. My father always helped me and would always encourage me to study, because it was important. He never went to college, never finished high school, but it was important for us to finish. So, my parents always supported me.

CA: Where do you work and what are your responsibilities?

OLH: I am only working part time. I worked for 25 years at Quinsigamond Community College as a coordinator for admissions and public relations. I retired due to illness. I retired and then after five years I decided to work again, to do something, because now I feel better and I work at the Worcester Community Action Council. I assist families who need to have access to resources.

CA: Is this difficult or easy for you?

OLH: It is easy.

CA: Easy?

OLH: Yes.

CA: Then, what position do you have at work?

OLH: I am a family advocate. [Laughs.]

CA: Are you eligible to receive a promotion or not, in your organization?

OLH: Yes, I've received them in the past, but no longer now because I only work part time. I used to be coordinator until January. I was a coordinator at the resource center for families... where all the family advocates are at. I had six other family advocates working with me, but they needed a full-time person. So, after several years, I cut down my time to twenty hours. And now they have a full-time person. So, for the moment, no. I already worked and received good promotions, so....

CA: When you were a little girl, did you ever dream with having this job or another job?

OLH: Another job. [Laughs.]

CA: What kind of job?

OLH: Fashion designer. [Laughs.]

CA: Yes, yes. Why?

OLH: Why did I want this job?

CA: Why [did you want to be a] fashion designer?

OLH: Because it is—when I was little I always was, I do not know—making my own clothes, beautiful. I had a blouse, I would cut and design it all by I myself, in my own way.

CA: Do you have friends at work?

OLH: Do I have friends...?

CA: In your work.

OLH: Yes.

CA: And do they help you with your job or not? When needed.

OLH: Yes, we work as a "team". Yes.

CA: Was it difficult to get this job?

OLH: No.

CA: No?

OLH: No.

CA: Did... did you have an interview?

OLH: Yes.

CA: How did you prepare for the interview?

OLH: I sent my résumé and with everything that I had done before and, fortunately, because I am well known in the community, I was given an interview and was offered the job.

CA: Has it been difficult for you to get this job, considering your Latina identity?

OLH: No, to me, no.

CA: Why did you choose this job over other jobs?

OLH: Because I was helping people and I was... I was interested in helping people in their own lives.

CA: Have you had other similar jobs before this... this job or not?

OLH: No, my previous job was different.

CA: Yes. So you really like this job and you don't want to look for another job?

OLH: At the moment, no. I like it.

CA: What are your long-term and short-term goals for your job?

OLH: My..., I'll, I'll..., I'm going to stay working there my twenty hours (sic), helping people in all I can, to connect them with resources in the community.

CA: What has this job meant to you?

OLH: It has...

CA: For your life.

OLH: It has given [helped] me to see the needs that exist in the community.

CA: How do you express your Latina culture through your work?

OLH: What? [Confusion]

OLH: How do I express...

CA: Oh. How do you express your Latina culture through your work? Do you speak in Spanish to some people, or...

OLH: How do I express myself when helping other Latino people?

CA: Yes.

OLH: Yes—helping other Latinos—forming a group for, for, Latino families where we can help them and speak Spanish. I provided the information in Spanish.

RT: Do you participate in volunteer work or community work?

OLH: I have participated a lot, yes.

RT: What do you like the most about what you do in the community?

OLH: This—working with the families and the children in different activities.

RT: Are there some difficult issues... in the... in the things you do in the community or everything is fine, or...?

OLH: No. Sometimes it is difficult to get things that are needed for families or it's necessary to struggle to get something for the neighborhood. So, it's not so easy, but it is good when some things are obtained.

RT: And do you consider yourself a politically active person?

OLH: Yes.

RT: How was your experience in New York as a child with a Hispanic origin?

OLH: For me it was good. I know for others it has not been so good, but for us, yes. It is because we were surrounded by people who supported us and in school, even though my sister and I were the only Latinas, we were fine.

RT: In your family, what kind of role did your culture play?

OLH: In my family? My parents are very... in our... are in our [laughs]... my parents. My parents are very integrated in the culture. So, in my house everything was Latino style. Everything was done according to our culture... very strict, right? All of that.

RT: And today, what importance do your origins have in various aspects of your life in Worcester, for example, at work, politics, and your personal life?

OLH: I understand my ethnicity more. I know how I can help other people through what I've learned. I've tried to—I have tried for my children to understand our culture, from which they

come, the Latino culture, and that they keep it. And also in my work when... today I am also very Latina.

RT: Do you know other Latina women, related to your work, serving in the Worcester community?

OLH: Yes, several.

RT: And how would you describe the Latino community in Worcester?

OLH: The people I know in... in the Latino culture, they are hard workers. They are people who are involved in the community and are always ready to help one another. And we know each other very well, all of us.

ME: Is it OK with you if we take a photograph for this project?

OLH: OK. [Laughs.]

Post-interview follow-up question:

CA: How have your experiences as a foster parent been like and how have they affected your life?

OLH: Okay. my experience as a foster parent, which is part of foster care, has been very good in many ways. My husband and I started being foster parents about five years ago and our first experience was with a two and a half year-old boy and a 14 year-old teenager. They were with us for five months, after that we had some kids for a weekend and when we took them to the agency, they started to cry that they didn't want to leave, and we ended up keeping them. The experience with them was very good for short years (sic). We learned a lot. And from there, we had a teen girl that was pregnant and was with us for two years. She has a baby, his name is Chad and two, who is now two years old. She does not live with us anymore. Now, we have another girl that is nineteen and has an eight-month-old baby boy, and she's going to college, is working, and is going to get her license so she's learned a lot with us. Our...our goal as foster parents is, like I said, to help these young people move forward, so they can do something with their lives so they can have a better opportunity than the one that they would have if they don't have people that are helping them and supporting them. Our... our goal, like I said, is to be able to help them and serve them, to guide them and also that they see in us as a place and, and as a relationship, so that they in the future can have the same. And that they aren't depending on the system, but rather on themselves so they can move forward.

CA: Okay, thanks.