

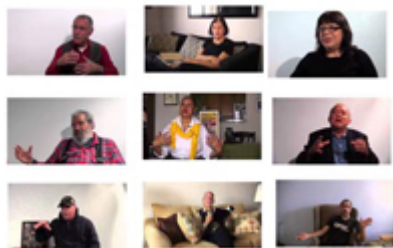
Centro Video Records Over 60 Oral Histories

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By Clarisel Gonzalez

Centro's oral history team has video recorded the stories of more than 60 of the over 100 leaders who participated in Centro's *100 Puerto Ricans Preserving Our Heritage Campaign*.



“The campaign’s goal is to collect oral histories from 100 Puerto Rican nominees that capture the collective story of the Puerto Rican diaspora,” said Cynthia Tobar, Centro’s library archivist who the oral historian coordinating the project. “We are still doing interviews,” she said. The project is designed to collect the memories of those have made a positive impact on the Puerto Rican community in the United States. All these contributions will further enrich Centro’s already renowned repository of history and heritage.

The spectrum of those interviewed is broad. It includes local leaders, activists, poets and artists, journalists, scholars and policymakers. Among this diverse group were: Miriam Colón, actress and founder of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, multiple Grammy nominee Latin Jazz musician Bobby Sanabria, meteorologist John Morales of Florida, scholar Virginia Sánchez Korrol, attorney Juan Cartagena of LatinoJustice PRLDEF and the Rev. Carmen Hernández, president/founder of the NYC LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce.

“An oral history,” Tobar said, “places a great deal of power back with those most underrepresented in our society and provides an alternative interpretation to the public. It explores different ways of presenting history.”

“There is a lot of validity to hearing an oral history,” she said. “It is a real life first person narrative. There is nothing quite as compelling as hearing someone’s personal story.”

An oral history is the collection and study of historical information about individuals, families, important events or everyday life. These interviews are conducted with people who participated in or observed past events and whose memories and perceptions of these are to be preserved as a record for future generations. An oral history strives to obtain information from different perspectives, and most of these cannot be found in written sources. Tobar said she was impressed with the diverse group of Puerto Ricans who are sharing their oral histories. “Everyone has a passion for what they are doing for the Puerto Rican community, from activists to policymakers,” she said.

In addition to Tobar, the oral history team includes Shakti Castro Camacho, Sarah Molinari and the newest member Jacqueline Lyon, who is conducting interviews in Florida.

Castro Camacho said, “We have spoken to academics and artists, people who fought for our civil rights. We get to get a full tapestry of the Puerto Rican experience with their words and their experiences. There is nothing more important than being heard.”

Her colleague Molinari added, “Documenting the life stories of Puerto Ricans in this project is the active process of memory reconstruction and preservation. These voices and stories narrate and incredibly important past and also bring to life many conditions of the diaspora's present.”

Of the more than 60 completed interviews, over 40 have been processed, according to archival standards and procedures. In addition to the video footage of the oral history, all interviews will be identified with such information as descriptions, written summaries, tags and subjects, metadata to help people search for an interview once the oral histories become available. The majority of the oral histories have been recorded in New York City. Some have also been recorded in Florida.

While many people know some of the facts about the Puerto Rican experience in the United States, such as that of the Great Migration, oral histories go beyond the facts. They explore what those facts mean and what it was like for the people who lived the experience. Oral histories, Castro Camacho said, give people a voice to tell the story their way.

“I have always been interested in storytelling,” Castro Camacho said. “I’m interested in how people present and represent themselves in stories. These oral histories show the diversity of who and what we are.”

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Among those interviewed are broadcast personality Malín Falú, who “has a beautiful voice” and spoke in Spanish about such issues as racism and the Latino media, and Nuyoricana poet Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, who is also documenting Puerto Rican history through his poetry and community work, she said.

For the campaign, Centro was particularly interested in (but not limited to) donations from outside the New York City areas and from the fields of media and communications, environment, sexuality and gender, military, religion, science and technology as well as law and order.

Eventually, the video recorded oral histories will be available online to students, educators, researchers and the general public.

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