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“Aspira, the Sixties and Growing Up Puerto Rican”

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The Sixties

There seems to be a nostalgia related to the decade of the 60s. It certainly was an intense period, major changes were happening. Outer space was being explored and a race was on between the Soviet Union and the United States to get the first man on the moon. Another war in Indochina was heating up, as the United States filled the gap left by the French in Vietnam. This led to an intense push back from the youth as they confronted the military draft. Race relations in the United States were volatile and the civil rights movement took center stage. Deteriorating conditions in the ghettos, later called the “inner cities”, burst into race riots. Feminism moved front and center as male and female sought to re-work traditional roles. The increased drug use and the psychedelic context to the “flower people” or hippies helped propel the counter culture. The Cuban Revolution inspired anti-colonial movements worldwide. The assassinations of President Kennedy in 1963, and in 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were bookends to the decade.

From Puerto Rico

In 1950 my father had sent for my mother, my brother and I and we arrived from Puerto Rico at Idlewild Airport in late November 1950. In 1963 Idlewild was renamed John F. Kennedy International Airport in honor of the assassinated President.

My father, who had served in World War II in the Pacific, had come stateside in the spring of 1950 to work as a migrant farm laborer to pick strawberries in Vineland, New Jersey. He arrived with his “carta de buena conducta” issued by the local Arecibo police precinct. He worked and saved the money he needed to send for us. The fifties marked the period of the mass migration of Puerto Ricans coming to New York City.

My family settled first with my father’s cousin and his family in a one bedroom apartment in Williamsburg Brooklyn. Within months we had moved to a large room on Bedford Street in Williamsburg. After a year in Williamsburg, Brooklyn my father was able to get our family a one bedroom apartment in a tenement on Norfolk Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In 1951 we settled on the Lower East Side and life unfolded.

For a time, my father worked at the old La Rosa spaghetti factory in Williamsburg Brooklyn. I remember we ate lots of pasta, cooked the Puerto Rican way of course. It was

pasta con pollo , instead of arroz con pollo. Very tasty. By the late fifties, my father got a job in the Hotel Industry and there he worked until he retired in 1989 and he and my mother returned to Puerto Rico. They made real what for many was “el mito del retorno”. As life would have it, due to health reasons several years after returning to Puerto Rico they returned to New York City in 1992.

Back in 1951, the tenements of the Lower East Side were inhabited by Jewish immigrants from mostly Eastern Europe. Many of them worked in the garment center. A large housing development was constructed by the Ladies Garment Workers Union in 1950 and many Jewish residents of the old tenements moved there. This shift made available apartments in the old tenement buildings which quickly were filled by Puerto Ricans. During the 50's I lived in a walk up tenement, with the bathroom in the hallway and bathtub in the kitchen. These buildings have now been mostly demolished, but can still be experienced at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum on Orchard Street.

The streets of the Lower East Side recreated the old home towns of Puerto Rico. Many of those who lived in my neighborhood were from Arecibo where my family was from. In one building that I lived in, we had family members living on each floor. I grew up speaking Spanish and listening to the music which my parents listened to which included the music of los Trios, Mexican boleros, musica jibara, mambo. Of course, by the late fifties and early sixties I was also listening to doo wop and rock and roll.

Nineteen Sixty One

In 1961, my family moved to the NYC Housing Authority Projects of the Lillian Wald Houses on Houston St. We felt it was a definite move up. We now had a bathroom and bathtub in one separate room and it was just for our family.

Global, national and local issues converged in very unique ways for those of us who were Puerto Rican teenagers during the sixties. 1961 was a very momentous year because that year West Side Story was released. Now Puerto Rican's were portrayed in the movies. This Romeo and Juliet type love story was brilliantly done and included among its principle characters the lone Puerto Rican actress in the cast, the phenomenal Rita Moreno. In spite of the violence and tragic ending it was almost tame compared to what was to become the reality for so many Puerto Rican youth in the 60's.

At fourteen years of age, the idea that a movie about Puerto Ricans had won so many awards felt good. It was however tinged with uneasiness because but for Rita Moreno the actors were not Puerto Rican.

In September of 1961 I entered Seward Park High School on the Lower East Side. That year marked the founding of Aspira, but I would not interact with Aspira until 1963. I had been an honor student in Junior High School and entered the Academic Regents program at Seward Park High School. I was fully bilingual and had been very active in the student government in Junior High School and did the same when I entered Seward Park HS.

Neither of my parents had gone beyond the third grade in Puerto Rico. My father had gotten his GED in Puerto Rico after he returned from World War II. My parents were “jibaros” from “el barrio Esperanza” in Arecibo. Our home was filled with music as family gatherings always included the guitar and my mother singing. My father was very strict and traditional in terms of what he allowed me to do. Being so restricted, I turned to reading and my studies.

As with many Puerto Rican families of that time, I had both my parents and my mother was, for the most part, a stay at home mom, especially during the years that my brother and I were in elementary school. To make ends meet my father would during the fall and winter, get the proverbial second job cleaning offices at night. Those earnings would go into the Christmas club account to assure the gifts for the holidays. This pattern was repeated for several decades.

As my brother and I entered Junior High School we would help at home with the “piece work” which my mother accepted to do at home from a local promoter for several factories. During one period of time I remember that we glued feathers onto magnets for a game which was put together someplace else. I remember that our house was full of feathers. This home based piece work helped to make ends meet.

Funny, I never thought of us as poor. Money was not plentiful, but my father was always able to provide. This situation began to change for many Puerto Ricans as light manufacturing left New York City and jobs required higher skills and training or post secondary education. This affected many Puerto Rican families and helped to fuel an increase of female headed households. At that time, getting welfare assistance meant that the men needed to be hidden or the assistance would not be forthcoming.

Those of us who became teens during the sixties were usually bilingual. We spoke Spanish at home and we listened to the music which our parents listened to. However, the tug and pull of our new environment was impacting us in many ways. We identified with the growing rock and roll genre and most especially doo wop and later the Motown sound, which developed in the Black community. I will also admit that I was a Beatle maniac. We were shaped by the civil rights movement and increasingly became aware of the discrimination we were victims of.

ASPIRA

In the spring of 1963 as I was in my junior year at Seward Park High School, my father who read El Diario every day, came upon an article about a new organization which could help Puerto Rican students. He brought the article to my attention and said that we should go to meet these people and see what they could do for me. While my father was very strict about my learning to ride a bike, which he did not approve, or my going out on my own, he was a staunch supporter of anything which would help me with my education. My goal of going to college was very much supported by my parents.

My father called Aspira and made an appointment. On that day my mother and I met my father as he got off work early and we went to Aspira's offices on 30th street and Fifth Avenue. It was a small slender building which I would get to know well.

That day has played over in my head so many times. It was truly a life changing experience. I was nervous and had done as my father had instructed and brought my report cards. We were brought in and introduced to the Executive Director, Ms. Antonia Pantoja, who years later became Dr. Antonia Pantoja. I was so impressed by this dark skinned, short and petite woman who spoke with such confidence and knowledge.

My father did a lot of the talking and I was a little embarrassed because he spoke so glowingly of me. Ms. Pantoja explained that the program would work with me in filling out the college applications etc. so that I could assure getting to college. She said she was impressed with my grades and talked about the importance of Puerto Rican youth working together for the good of the Puerto Rican community.

My father was very impressed with what he heard and asked Ms. Pantoja how much this would cost. "Oh no," she said, "This is for free. The payment comes later, cuando ella termine and she will pay," and she pointed to me. That made me nervous as I thought of what I would have to do to pay back? She then went on to outline how that payment would be in my organizing an Aspira Club in Seward Park High School. I perked up immediately, as she described the steps to organizing the Club. She suggested that the first step would be to secure a faculty advisor. She asked if there was any teacher that I thought would be especially receptive to working with Puerto Rican students. I mentioned Ms. Ortiz, who had grown up on the Lower East Side and whose brothers I knew from the neighborhood. Ms. Ortiz should be who I should approach she counseled. The students would also need to be recruited. She said that Aspira would work with me in providing training and materials. My marching orders were to first get the faculty advisor and then a group of students who would join the club and then return to Aspira.

The Juan Morel Campos Aspira Club at Seward Park High School

That spring of my junior year was an intense period of work to make real the charge given to me by Ms. Pantoja. I began to recruit members to the Club and I got the commitment of Ms. Ortiz as our faculty advisor. When I returned to Aspira, I was informed of the fact that the practice was that each Club needed to be named after a Puerto Rican historical figure. I went back to the core group which had agreed to organize the club and after consulting with some materials I had gotten at Aspira and with our families, we all agreed to the name of the Puerto Rican composer, Juan Morel Campos.

The composer of danzas had been born in Ponce in 1857. He had been one of the founders of "La Banda de Bomberos del Parque de Bombas de Ponce". He had also established a dance orchestra and his danzas were very well known. Moreover, he was

the uncle of Pedro Albizu Campos. All these elements gave special meaning to our choice of name for our Aspira Club at Seward Park High School.

During that summer of 1963, I participated in training sessions with other students who either had a Club or, like me, were organizing one. During those trainings I was taught Robert's Rules of Order and best practices in planning for and conducting meetings. Those skills have served me well through out my career. Key to my development was being taught the Aspira "triple A" process premised on "Awareness, Analysis, and Action". That framework remains with me to this day.

As a result of applying the process to the soon to be launched Juan Morel Campos Aspira Club, I came to realize that since I was to become a senior during the first year of the new Club, it would not be prudent for me to be president. Since I had organized the Club, I had to convince the students who I had recruited that it would be best for reasons of continuity to vote for a junior as President. I could be selected as the additional representative of our Club to the city wide Aspira Clubs Federation. That is exactly what occurred.

One of the requirements of the Club was the study of Puerto Rican history. While all of us professed our pride in our heritage, most of us knew little of the history of Puerto Rico. Aspira had some booklets which we were given and that started us on a dizzying experience of self awareness and national identity. We were so taken with what we were learning that our nationalism was rightly ignited. Remember, the Sixties were the days which had been heralded with the West Side Story view of Puerto Ricans. That was soon followed with the notoriety of the Capeman killings by Salvador Agron. Puerto Ricans were highly discriminated against.

Given this context the members of the Juan Morel Campos Aspira Club agreed that we would follow the example of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico and dress in black skirts and white blouses for the girls and white shirts and black pants for the boys for our meetings. This created a buzz at Seward Park High School which eventually got our faculty advisor to ask us to tone it down. Ms. Ortiz made it clear that we could continue our meetings but we should not draw unnecessary attention. Gangs were then as now an element which was viewed as very negative and a group, though school based which took on the addition of colors to our image made the authorities uneasy. One of the things she recommended was to make our meetings more inviting of whoever wanted to attend. Thus we turned some of our meetings into more open events where we would present on different topics of Puerto Rican history and culture.

Needless to say these experiences generated tremendous emotions in myself and my fellow Aspirantes. On the one hand, we were subjected to societal scorn which hurt us, but on the other, our new found knowledge of our culture and history filled us with pride. Through the practice of the Aspira process of "Awareness, Analysis and Action" we became emboldened to claim our rights.

The Aspira Clubs Federation

September 1963 through June 1964 was an intense year for me as I had to work hard to maintain my grades on the honor roll. My passion in school was studying foreign languages. While I had already passed the regents in French, had gotten advanced placement in Spanish, I was preparing for the citywide exam in NYC's first Mandarin language class. Earlier in 1963 I appeared on the CBS Sunday Morning show where I was interviewed for being one of three non Chinese students in the first Mandarin language class in a New York City public school. By the way, I passed with a 91. Hsieh hsieh- gracias. I also worked after school as a tutor for Mobilization for Youth's homework helper program with elementary school students. This was something I had to give up during the second half of my senior year. The meetings of the Aspira Clubs Federation (ACF) were after school and I had become deeply involved in the work of the ACF.

The ACF brought together all the Presidents and ACF High School Club representatives from through out the City. That in of itself was tremendously exciting since most of us had been confined to lives lived in our individual communities. Now we were able to meet with other Puerto Rican students who were college bound and were developing a deep sense of community activism and awareness of our community on a city wide level.

As a member of the ACF I was privileged to have been nurtured by Ms. Antonia Pantoja herself. She would meet with us and she would challenge us by asking probing questions. Those meetings were incredible for all of us. The discussions were heady and we would be talking about them long after the meeting was over. She did not speak down to us. She respected our opinion and we felt valued in her presence, while at the same time we knew we had lots to learn.

That year we were very excited to learn that Ms. Pantoja had secured funding to take a group of Aspira student leaders to Puerto Rico for a week in July of 1964. This would be the first such trip and all of us wanted to go.

July 1964 – Aspira Trip to Puerto Rico

Nineteen sixty four was such a momentous year for me. I graduated from High School with honors and was going to start Hunter College in September. My father had not agreed to my going away to school, in spite of Aspira's best efforts to convince him otherwise. Harvard sounded good, but he wanted me close to home. He did agree to let me participate in the first ever Aspira trip to Puerto Rico in July of 1964.

The excitement leading up to the trip was intense. For many of the students this would be their first trip to Puerto Rico. I had been to Puerto Rico in the summer of 1961. It had been a gift from my parents for having done so well in Junior High School. I always remember that trip fondly. It was a get to know my family trip and it deepened in me such pride of my Puerto Rican roots. For me the Aspira trip was another sort of rites of passage, but this time it would be to delve into the historical and socio-political reality of

my “Puerto Ricanness”. I also felt that it was to be a more mature travel experience since I would not be staying with family.

There were preparation meetings held at Aspira. We were introduced to the staff who would accompany us on that trip which was going to be led by Antonia Pantoja herself. Among the staff, as well as the participants were individuals who have become some of the key movers and shakers in the Puerto Rican community in NYC and beyond during the decades since. Maria Canino and Yolanda Sánchez were in charge of the girls on that trip.

For many of us, it was also the first time away from our families, which for teenagers is a big thing. Most of us were between 16 – 18 years of age and the fact that it was a coed group gave the staff an extra element they had to deal with. A few had paired up, but for the most part it was more flirting than anything else. We were super hyped for the trip and donned our best duds to depart.

Honestly, none of us ever expected the incredible reception which we received when we arrived in Puerto Rico. We were met by the press and a front page article in the papers with our arrival picture under a headline which heralded the arrival of “the Puerto Rican youth leaders from NYC.”

The trip had been carefully planned by Pantoja and the Aspira staff. I wish I had kept some of the materials from the trip, but at seventeen you don’t have that sense of history nor fully understood the significance of that journey.

We stayed at the dorms of the University of Puerto Rico and had an intense schedule for the days we were there. The schedule included some remarkable encounters. We were received by the then Governor of Puerto Rico and a key historical figure, Luis Muñoz Marin. It was his last year in office and we felt honored that he should meet with us. My family was greatly impressed by this to say the least. We were received at the home of the then head of the Senate of Puerto Rico, Samuel R. Quiñones. In addition we attended a panel presentation on the political status of Puerto Rico which included a young Ruben Berrios representing the Puerto Rico Independence Party.

Throughout the trip Ms. Pantoja was always debriefing with us about what had transpired that day. It was an intense experience for all of us. We were giddy with excitement. That trip transformed me as an individual as it deepened my sense of self as a Puerto Rican and my belief of the need to fight for justice.

Hunter College 1964-1968 and Organizing Aspira Clubs

After returning from the Aspira trip to Puerto Rico my primary focus was starting college in September 1964. My first day at Hunter College was very eventful, as I encountered a picket line of female students who opposed the fact that Hunter College had now admitted its first coed class. I was a little taken aback and somewhat hesitant, but I did

enter the building and began my college years. The picket was not long lived and frankly though I am a feminist the complaint of having to give up bathrooms on every other floor did not seem a worthwhile reason to keep boys from attending.

I had gotten myself an after school part time job as a typist of marketing reports to earn money to cover my expenses. This job lasted several months and I left it to work as an Aspira student club organizer. Aspira had secured funding to pay a group of us, some of whom had been on the trip to Puerto Rico in 1964, to work after school with the evolving Aspira Clubs city wide. I was responsible for Manhattan and it was a fabulous experience. It was during this time that I proposed to Aspira the launch of an Aspira Club outside a school setting. At first, they were not convinced, but I was asked to find an appropriate sponsor and they would consider it. I approached the Henry Street Settlement in the Lower East Side, which is where I lived and had grown up. Henry St. had developed a Youth Development Program, and Jim Robinson agreed to sponsor an evening Aspira Club which I would organize at the settlement house. In 1966 Aspira accepted the concept and by the fall of 1966 we had established the José De Diego Aspira Club at the Henry Street Settlement. The group included youth who had dropped out of school, as well as students in the 9th grade and students from diverse high schools.

That experience was one which bore some wonderful fruit. Some of those who had dropped out eventually got back onto the school track and the majority of the others went on to good careers and some have become noted community leaders in the city of New York. Today, 40 years later, I am happy to say that I continue to stay in touch with a core group of the original members.

The wonderful results with the club did not go un-noticed by Henry Street Settlement. Several months before my graduation from Hunter College in June of 1968, Jim Robinson offered me a job. I accepted my first full time job as the Supervisor of the After School Programs at Henry Street Settlement, as part of the Youth Development Department headed by Jim Robinson, and began to work full time in August 1968.

Jim Robinson was my first boss in a full time job. He was a mentor who taught me so much about his experience as a Black whose family had come from the south. We shared many values of justice and fairness. His cousin was H Rap Brown who was a well known Black radical at the time. Like Dr. Pantoja, Jim inspired the youth he worked with. He was the first practitioner of youth development principles that I was privileged to work with and learn from. We remained close even after I left Henry Street Settlement. Unfortunately, he died young during the 1980s. I was honored in 1991 when I was awarded the first Jim Robinson Community Service Award given by the Henry Street Settlement. I was extremely touched to receive that award which was presented to me by some of the young people I had worked with in the Jose De Diego Aspira Club and the Youth Steering Committee of Henry Street Settlement. One of them, Julio Colon now sits on the Board of the Henry Street Settlement.

Once an Aspirante, Always an Aspirante

During the 70's I did work for a year as a counselor in Aspira's College Retention Program. I started a Doctoral program in Anthropology at NYU which I did not finish, as my priorities changed and my political activism became the overriding priority in my life. My work in the Puerto Rican independence movement, first in the MPI and later the PSP, and on women's issues, was the core of my efforts for over 20 years during the 70's and 80's.

Nevertheless, true to my nurturing by Aspira, I finally completed a Masters in Urban Affairs at Hunter College in 1981. In 1985, I was the proud recipient of the first ever Aspira Alumnus of the Year Award and in 1990 became the President of the Aspira Alumni Association as part of Aspira of New York.

In April of 2002, 39 years after my first meeting with Dr. Antonia Pantoja, I joined her as a co-founder of the Aspirante Alumni Fellowship. This was the payback that she had so prophetically pointed out at that first meeting with my parents back in spring 1963. After Dr. Pantoja's passing in May 2002, our group decided to change our name to the Dr. Antonia Pantoja Fellowship. Our goal to mobilize Aspirantes remains a critical element of our work, as well as promoting the legacy of Dr. Antonia Pantoja to our Puerto Rican/Latino youth.

An intense depth of emotion is stirred within me whenever I think of my Aspira experience and the mentoring I received from Dr. Pantoja. As I look back on my life and the person I have become and my successes the thread that connects it all is my experience in Aspira.

I was so fortunate to have been mentored by Dr. Antonia Pantoja. The dedication which Dr. Pantoja bestowed on all of us, has been an example which I find is sorely needed in our community today. The importance of a leadership of integrity and the need to guide our young people to emulate that type of leadership is essential to our future as a people. The spark ignited by Aspira remains ever bright but we must nurture it. As we would always say- Once and Aspirante, Always an Aspirante.

Thank you. Gracias.